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Watson's Apology

FOR

CHRISTIANITY.

APOLOGY

OF

CHRISTIANITY.

AN

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FOR

CHRISTIANITY.

IN

A SERIES OF LETTERS,

Addreſſed to EDWARD GIBBON, Eſq;
Author of the HISTORY OF THE DECLINE
AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE.

Being a neceſſary and inſtructive APPENDIX
thereto.

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THE FIRST AMERICAN EDITION.

PRINTED AT *PROVIDENCE (R. ISLAND)*
BY *CARTER* AND *WILKINSON*,
and ſold at their Book-Store, oppoſite the Market.

M,DCC,XCIV.

1794

ADVERTISEMENT

For the AMERICAN EDITION of Dr. WATSON'S

APOLOGY FOR CHRISTIANITY.

THE American public are now preſented with the juſtly celebrated Letters of Dr. WATSON, to the Author of the "DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE,"—from a copy, which, with difficulty, was obtained from the library of a private gentleman in England.

THE pen of this truly elegant and claſſical hiſtorian has been unhappily directed, in ſome chapters, againſt the evidences of a religion, for which he profeſſes a high eſteem. Theſe contain plauſible inſinuations, which expoſe young and uninformed minds to cheriſh ſceptical ſentiments concerning the

the divine original of the goſpel, and the miraculous energetic influence of the Deity, diſplayed in its primitive eſtabliſhment. The poiſon is gilded, and offers itſelf as a luſcious draught to the vicious and unwary. His admirers need a monitor, at hand, to deter them from it; or an antidote, to repel its noxious qualities, and reſtore to ſanity and to truth thoſe who have incautiouſly imbibed it.

THE poliſhed ſtyle, the harmonious periods, the well-arranged and entertaining facts of the hiſtorian, have introduced his volumes into our univerſities, and many circulating and private libraries of this country.

To the patronage of the friends of hiſtorical truth, and of revealed religion, whether preſiding and inſtructing at our colleges and academies, whether officiating as teachers of Chriſtianity, or lending their aid, in the private walks of life, to its propagation, the Letters of the learned, philoſophic and catholic WATSON, are preſented. The celebrity of a name, which has been ranked in the firſt claſs of European literati, will commend the ſubſequent pages to the peruſal of thoſe, who, unacquainted with their particular merit, ſeek the ſociety and correſpondence of men crowned with the public laurel. The work before us has been received with very uncommon applauſe in the native country of its author. It was rewarded, by the church of which he was a member, with his promotion to a biſhopric, the functions whereof he has ably and ſeduloufly fulfilled. Perhaps ſo much uſeful erudition has never been diſplayed, in ſo few pages, in any defence of Chriſtianity hitherto preſented to the public. The addreſs to ſceptical gentlemen, at the cloſe of the letters, claims their ſerious and impartial peruſal.

THE

THE preſent edition has been committed to the preſs, at the inſtance of ſome, who, though not called by Providence to the public defence of the RELIGION of JESUS, yet eſteem it their ineſtimable treaſure, and ardently pray for the diſſemination of its principles and bleſſings among mankind.

THIS volume will be found entertaining and improving to thoſe who are ſtrangers to Mr. GIBBON, as containing a happy arrangement of ſome of the leading arguments in ſupport of Chriſtianity; and of rational replies, combating the ſophiſms and ungenerous inſinuations which have been uttered againſt it.

THE readers and admirers of the hiſtorian, will conſider it as a neceſſary and inſtructive Appendix to the DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE. It diſcovers deep thought, and extenſive reading, and breathes a calm, a manly, a chriſtian temper. The poliſhed ſtyle of Dr. WATSON is compared by Mr. GIBBON himſelf to the ſmoothneſs of the Ionic dialect.

BUT the ſubſequent candid acknowledgment of the hiſtorian, who, in defending himſelf againſt other antagoniſts, declined a public controverſy with our Author, will make further obſervations unneceſſary.

"WHEN Dr. WATSON gave to the public his APOLOGY "FOR CHRISTIANITY, in a ſeries of letters, he addreſſed "them to the Author of the DECLINE AND FALL OF THE "ROMAN EMPIRE, with a juſt confidence, that he had con- "ſidered this important object in a manner not unworthy

"of

" of his antagoniſt, or of himſelf. Dr. WATSON's mode of " thinking, bears a liberal and philoſophical caſt; his " thoughts are expreſſed with ſpirit, and their ſpirit is al- " ways tempered by politeneſs and moderation. Such is " the man whom I ſhould be happy to call my friend, and " whom I ſhould not bluſh to call my antagoniſt. But the " ſame motives which might tempt me to accept, or even to " ſolicit a private and amicable conference, diſſuaded me " from entering into a public controverſy with a writer of ſo " reſpectable a character; and I embraced the earlieſt op- " portunity of expreſſing to Dr. WATSON himſelf, how " ſincerely I agreed with him in thinking, that 'as the ' world is now poſſeſſed of the opinion of us both upon ' the ſubject in queſtion, it may be, perhaps, as proper for ' us both to leave it in this ſtate.' *

* *Gibbon's Vindication of ſome paſſages againſt ſeveral opponents.*

Apology for CHRISTIANITY.

LETTER FIRST.

SIR,

IT would give me much uneaſineſs to be reputed an enemy to free enquiry in religious matters, or as capable of being animated into any degree of perſonal malevolence againſt thoſe who differ from me in opinion. On the contrary, I look upon the right of private judgment, in every concern reſpecting God and ourſelves, as ſuperior to the controul of human authority; and have ever regarded free diſquiſition, as the beſt means of illuſtrating the doctrine, and eſtabliſhing the truth of Chriſtianity. Let

the followers of Mahomet, and the zealots of the church of Rome, ſupport their ſeveral religious ſyſtems by damping every effort of the human intellect to pry into the foundations of their faith; but never can it become a Chriſtian, to be afraid of being aſked a *reaſon of the faith that is in him*; nor a Proteſtant, to be ſtudious of enveloping his religion in myſtery and ignorance; nor the church of England, to abandon that moderation, by which ſhe permits every individual et ſentire quæ velit, et quæ ſentiat dicere.

It is not, Sir, without ſome reluctance, that, under the influence of theſe opinions, I have prevailed upon myſelf to addreſs theſe letters to you; and you will attribute to the ſame motive, my not having given you this trouble ſooner. I had moreover an expectation, that the taſk would have been undertaken by ſome perſon, capable of doing greater juſtice to the ſubject, and more worthy of your attention. Perceiving, however, that the two laſt chapters, the fifteenth in particular, of your very laborious and claſſical hiſtory of the Decline and Fall of the Roman empire, had made upon many an impreſſion

not

not at all advantageous to Chriſtianity; and that the ſilence of others, of the clergy eſpecially, began to be looked upon as an acquieſcence in what you had therein advanced; I have thought it my duty, with the utmoſt reſpect and good will towards you, to take the liberty of ſuggeſting to your conſideration, a few remarks upon ſome of the paſſages, which have been eſteemed (whether you meant that they ſhould be ſo eſteemed, or not) as powerfully militating againſt that revelation, which ſtill is to many, what it formerly was *to the Greeks, fooliſhneſs*; but which we deem to be true, to be *the power of God unto ſalvation to every one that believeth.*

To the enquiry by what means the Chriſtian faith obtained ſo remarkable a victory over the eſtabliſhed religions of the earth, you rightly anſwer, by the evidence of the doctrine itſelf, and the ruling providence of its Author. But afterwards, in aſſigning for this aſtoniſhing event five ſecondary cauſes, derived from the paſſions of the human heart and the general circumſtances of mankind, you ſeem to ſome to have inſinuated, that

Chriſtianity, like other impoſtures, might have made its way in the world, though its origin had been as human as the means by which you ſuppoſe it was ſpread. It is no wiſh or intention of mine, to faſten the odium of this inſinuation upon you; I ſhall ſimply endeavour to ſhew, that the cauſes you produce, are either inadequate to the attainment of the end propoſed; or that their efficiency, great as you imagine it, was derived from other principles than thoſe you have thought proper to mention.

Your firſt cauſe is "the inflexible, and, if you may uſe the expreſſion, the intolerant zeal of the Chriſtians, derived, it is true, from the Jewiſh religion, but purified from the narrow and unſocial ſpirit, which, inſtead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moſes."—Yes, Sir, we are agreed, that the zeal of the Chriſtians was inflexible; *neither death, nor life, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things preſent, nor things to come*, could bend it into a ſeparation *from the love of God, which was in Chriſt Jeſus their Lord*; it was an inflexible obſtinacy, in not blaſpheming the name of Chriſt, which every where

where expoſed them to perſecution; and which even your amiable and philoſophic Pliny thought proper, for want of other crimes, to puniſh with death in the Chriſtians of his province.—We are agreed too, that the zeal of the Chriſtians was intolerant; for it denounced *tribulation and anguiſh upon every ſoul of man that did evil, of the Jew firſt, and alſo of the Gentile*; it would not tolerate in Chriſtian worſhip, thoſe who ſupplicated the image of Cæſar, who bowed down at the altars of Paganiſm, who mixed with the votaries of Venus, or wallowed in the filth of Bacchanalian feſtivals.

But though we are thus far agreed, with reſpect to the inflexibility and intolerance of Chriſtian zeal; yet as to the principle from which it was derived, we are *toto cælo* divided in opinion. You deduce it from the Jewiſh religion; I would refer it to a more adequate and a more obvious ſource, a full perſuaſion of the truth of Chriſtianity. What! think you that it was a zeal derived from the unſociable ſpirit of Judaiſm, which inſpired Peter with courage to upbraid the whole people of the Jews in the very capital of

Judea, with having *delivered up Jeſus, with having denied him in the preſence of Pilate, with having deſired a murderer to be granted them in his ſtead, with having killed the Prince of life?* Was it from this principle, that the ſame apoſtle, in conjunction with John, when ſummoned, not before the dregs of the people (whoſe judgments they might have been ſuppoſed capable of miſleading, and whoſe reſentment they might have deſpiſed) but before the rulers and the elders and the ſcribes, the dread tribunal of the Jewiſh nation, and commanded by them to teach no more in the name of Jeſus; boldly anſwered, *that they could not but ſpeak the things which they had ſeen and heard?—they had ſeen with their eyes, they had handled with their hands the word of life*; and no human juriſdiction could deter them from being faithful witneſſes of what they had ſeen and heard. Here then you may perceive the genuine and undoubted origin of that zeal, which you aſcribe to what appears to me a very inſufficient cauſe; and which the Jewiſh rulers were ſo far from conſidering as the ordinary effect of their religion, that they were exceedingly at a loſs

how

how to account for it;—*now when they ſaw the boldneſs of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled.* The Apoſtles, heedleſs of conſequences, and regardleſs of every thing but truth, openly every where profeſſed themſelves witneſſes of the reſurrection of Chriſt; and with a confidence, which could proceed from nothing but conviction, and which pricked the Jews to the heart, bade *the houſe of Iſrael know aſſuredly, that God had made that ſame Jeſus, whom they had crucified, both Lord and Chriſt.*

I MEAN not to produce theſe inſtances of apoſtolic zeal, as direct proofs of the truth of Chriſtianity; for every religion, nay, every abſurd ſect of every religion, has had its zealots, who have not ſcrupled to maintain their principles at the expence of their lives; and we ought no more to infer the truth of Chriſtianity from the mere zeal of its propagators, than the truth of Mahometaniſm from that of a Turk. When a man ſuffers himſelf to be covered with infamy, pillaged of his property, and dragged at laſt to the block or the ſtake, rather than give up his opinion; the proper inference is, not

that his opinion is true, but that he believes it to be true; and a queſtion of ſerious diſcuſſion immediately preſents itſelf,—upon what foundation has he built his belief? This is often an intricate enquiry, including in it a vaſt compaſs of human learning; a Bramin or a Mandarin, who ſhould obſerve a miſſionary atteſting the truth of Chriſtianity with his blood, would, notwithſtanding, have a right to aſk many queſtions, before it could be expected, that he ſhould give an aſſent to our faith. In the caſe indeed of the Apoſtles, the enquiry would be much leſs perplexed; ſince it would briefly reſolve itſelf into this, whether they were credible reporters of facts, which they themſelves profeſſed to have ſeen:—And it would be an eaſy matter to ſhew, that their zeal in atteſting what they were certainly competent to judge of, could not proceed from any alluring proſpect of worldly intereſt or ambition, or from any other probable motive than a love of truth.

But the credibility of the Apoſtles' teſtimony, or their competency to judge of the facts which they relate, is not now to be examined; the queſtion before us ſimply relates

lates to the principle, by which their zeal was excited; and it is a matter of real aſtoniſhment to me, that any one converſant with the hiſtory of the firſt propagation of Chriſtianity, acquainted with the oppoſition it every where met with from the people of the Jews, and aware of the repugnancy which muſt ever ſubſiſt between its tenets and thoſe of Judaiſm, ſhould ever think of deriving the zeal of the primitive Chriſtians from the Jewiſh religion.

Both Jew and Chriſtian, indeed, believed in one God, and abominated idolatry; but this deteſtation of idolatry, had it been unaccompanied with the belief of the reſurrection of Chriſt, would probably have been juſt as inefficacious in exciting the zeal of the Chriſtian to undertake the converſion of the Gentile world, as it had for ages been in exciting that of the Jew. But ſuppoſing, what I think you have not proved, and what I am certain cannot be admitted without proof, that a zeal derived from the Jewiſh religion inſpired the firſt Chriſtians with fortitude to oppoſe themſelves to the inſtitutions of Paganiſm; what was it, that encouraged

raged them to attempt the converſion of their own countrymen? Amongſt the Jews they met with no ſuperſtitious obſervances of idolatrous rites; and therefore amongſt them could have no opportunity of "declaring and confirming their zealous oppoſition to Polytheiſm, or of fortifying by frequent proteſtations their attachment to the Chriſtian faith." Here then at leaſt, the cauſe you have aſſigned for Chriſtian zeal ceaſes to operate; and we muſt look out for ſome other principle than a zeal againſt idolatry, or we ſhall never be able ſatisfactorily to explain the ardour, with which the Apoſtles preſſed the diſciples of Moſes, to become the diſciples of Chriſt.

AGAIN, does a determined oppoſition to, and an open abhorrence of, every the minuteſt part of an eſtabliſhed religion, appear to you to be the moſt likely method of conciliating to another faith thoſe who profeſs it? The Chriſtians, you contend, could neither mix with the Heathens in their convivial entertainments, nor partake with them in the celebration of their ſolemn feſtivals; they could neither aſſociate with them in their hymenæal, nor funeral rites; they could not

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cultivate their arts, or be ſpectators of their ſhews; in ſhort, in order to eſcape the rites of Polytheiſm, they were, in your opinion, obliged to renounce the commerce of mankind, and all the offices and amuſements of life. Now how ſuch an extravagant and intemperate zeal as you here deſcribe, can, humanly ſpeaking, be conſidered as one of the chief cauſes of the quick propagation of Chriſtianity, in oppoſition to all the eſtabliſhed powers of Paganiſm, is a circumſtance I can by no means comprehend. The Jeſuit miſſionaries, whoſe human prudence no one will queſtion, were quite of a contrary way of thinking; and brought a deſerved cenſure upon themſelves, for not ſcrupling to propagate the faith of Chriſt, by indulging to their Pagan converts a frequent uſe of idolatrous ceremonies. Upon the whole, it appears to me, that the Chriſtians were in no wiſe indebted to the Jewiſh religion, for the zeal with which they propagated the goſpel amongſt Jews as well as Gentiles; and that ſuch a zeal as you deſcribe, let its principle be what you pleaſe, could never have been deviſed by any human underſtanding, as a probable

bable means of promoting the progreſs of a reformation in religion, much leſs could it have been thought of, or adopted, by a few ignorant and unconnected men.

In expatiating upon this ſubject you have taken an opportunity of remarking, that "the contemporaries of Moſes and Joſhua had beheld with careleſs indifference the moſt amazing miracles—and that, in contradiction to every known principle of the human mind, that ſingular people (the Jews) ſeem to have yielded a ſtronger and more ready aſſent to the traditions of their remote anceſtors, than to the evidence of their own ſenſes." This obſervation bears hard upon the veracity of the Jewiſh ſcriptures; and, was it true, would force us either to reject them, or to admit a poſition as extraordinary as a miracle itſelf;—that the teſtimony of others produced in the human mind, a ſtronger degree of conviction concerning a matter of fact, than the teſtimony of the ſenſes themſelves.—It happens however, in the preſent caſe, that we are under no neceſſity of either rejecting the Jewiſh ſcriptures, or of admitting ſuch an abſurd poſition; for the fact is not true,

that

that the contemporaries of Moſes and Joſhua beheld with careleſs indifference, the miracles related in the Bible to have been performed in their favour. That theſe miracles were not ſufficient to awe the Iſraelites into an uniform obedience to the Theocracy, cannot be denied; but, whatever reaſons may be thought beſt adapted to account for the propenſity of the Jews to idolatry, and their frequent defection from the worſhip of the one true God, a "ſtubborn incredulity" cannot be admitted as one of them.

To men, indeed, whoſe underſtandings have been enlightened by the Chriſtian revelation, and enlarged by all the aids of human learning; who are under no temptations to idolatry from without, and whoſe reaſon from within, would revolt at the idea of worſhipping the infinite Author of the univerſe under any created ſymbol;—to men who are compelled, by the utmoſt exertion of their reaſon, to admit as an irrefragable truth, what puzzles the firſt principles of all reaſoning—the eternal exiſtence of an uncauſed Being:—and who are conſcious, that they cannot

give

give a full account of any one phænomenon in nature, from the rotation of the great orbs of the univerſe to the germination of a blade of graſs, without having recourſe to him, as the primary incomprehenſible cauſe of it;—and who from ſeeing him every where, have, by a ſtrange fatality (converting an exceſs of evidence into a principle of diſbelief) at times doubted concerning his exiſtence any where, and made the very univerſe their God;—to men of ſuch a ſtamp, it appears almoſt an incredible thing, that any human being which had ſeen the order of nature interrupted, or the uniformity of its courſe ſuſpended, though but for a moment, ſhould ever afterwards loſe the impreſſion of reverential awe, which, they apprehend, would have been excited in their minds. But whatever effect the viſible interpoſition of the Deity might have in removing the ſcepticiſm, or confirming the faith of a few philoſophers, it is with me a very great doubt, whether the people in general of our days, would be more ſtrongly affected by it, than they appear to have been in the days of Moſes.

Was any people under heaven to eſcape the certain deſtruction impending over them,

from

from the close pursuit of an enraged and irresistible enemy, by seeing the waters of the ocean *becoming a wall to them on their right hand and on their left*; they would, I apprehend, be agitated by the very same passions we are told the Israelites were, when they saw the sea returning to his strength, and swallowing up the host of Pharaoh; they *would fear the Lord, they would believe the Lord*, and they would express their faith and their fear by praising the Lord:—They would not behold such a great work with *careless indifference*, but with astonishment and terror; nor would you be able to detect the slightest vestige of *stubborn incredulity* in their song of gratitude.—No length of time would be able to blot from their minds the memory of such a transaction, or induce a doubt concerning its Author, though future hunger and thirst might make them call out for water and bread, with a desponding and rebellious importunity.

But it was not at the Red Sea only, that the Israelites regarded with something more than a *careless indifference* the amazing miracles which God had wrought; for when the law was declared to them from Mount Sinai, *all the people saw*

ſaw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noiſe of the tempeſt, and the mountains ſmoking; and when the people ſaw it, they removed and ſtood afar off, and they ſaid unto Moſes, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: But let not God ſpeak with us, leſt we die.—This again, Sir, is the Scripture account of the language of the contemporaries of Moſes and Joſhua; and I leave it to you to conſider, whether this is the language of *ſtubborn incredulity, and careleſs indifference.*

We are told in Scripture too, that whilſt any of the *contemporaries* of Moſes and Joſhua were alive, the whole people ſerved the Lord; the impreſſion which a ſight of the miracles had made, was never effaced; nor the obedience which might have been expected as a natural conſequence, refuſed, till Moſes and Joſhua, and all their contemporaries, were gathered unto their fathers; till *another generation after them aroſe, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Iſrael.*—But *the people ſerved the Lord all the days of Joſhua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joſhua, who had ſeen all the great works of the Lord that he did for Iſrael.*

I AM

I AM far from thinking you, Sir, unacquainted with Scripture, or desirous of sinking the weight of its testimony; but as the words of the history, from which you must have derived your observation, will not support you, in imputing *careless indifference* to the contemporaries of Moses, or *stubborn incredulity* to the forefathers of the Jews; I know not what can have induced you to pass so severe a censure upon them, except that you look upon a lapse into idolatry as a proof of infidelity. In answer to this, I would remark, that with equal soundness of argument we ought to infer, that every one who transgresses a religion, disbelieves it; and that every individual, who in any community incurs civil pains and penalties, is a disbeliever of the existence of the authority by which they are inflicted. The sanctions of the Mosaic law were, in your opinion, terminated within the narrow limits of this life; in that particular then, they must have resembled the sanctions of all other civil laws; *transgress and die* is the language of every one of them, as well as that of Moses; and I know not what reason we have to expect, that the Jews, who were animated by the same hopes of tempo-

ral rewards, impelled by the ſame fears of temporal puniſhments with the reſt of mankind, ſhould have been ſo ſingular in their conduct, as never to have liſtened to the clamours of paſſion before the ſtill voice of reaſon; as never to have preferred a preſent gratification of ſenſe, in the lewd celebration of idolatrous rites, before the rigid obſervance of irkſome ceremonies.

Before I releaſe you from the trouble of this letter, I cannot help obſerving, that I could have wiſhed you had furniſhed your reader with Limborch's anſwers to the objections of the Jew Orobio, concerning the perpetual obligation of the law of Moſes; you have indeed mentioned Limborch with reſpect, in a ſhort note; but though you have ſtudiouſly put into the mouths of the Judaiſing Chriſtians in the Apoſtolic days, and with great ſtrength inſerted into your text, whatever has been ſaid by Orobio or others againſt Chriſtianity, from the ſuppoſed perpetuity of the Moſaic diſpenſation; yet you have not favoured us with any one of the numerous replies, which have been made to theſe ſeemingly ſtrong objections. You are pleaſed, it is true, to ſay, "that the induſtry of

our

our learned divines has abundantly explained the ambiguous language of the old Teſtament, and the ambiguous conduct of the Apoſtolic teachers." It requires, Sir, no learned induſtry, to explain what is ſo obvious and ſo expreſs, that he who runs may read it: The language of the old Teſtament is this; *Behold, the days come, ſaith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the houſe of Iſrael, and with the houſe of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.* This, methinks, is a clear and ſolemn declaration, there is no ambiguity at all in it, that the covenant with Moſes was not to be perpetual, but was in ſome future time to give way to a *new covenant.* I will not detain you with an explanation of what Moſes himſelf has ſaid upon this ſubject; but you may try, if you pleaſe, whether you can apply the following declaration, which Moſes made to the Jews, to any prophet or ſucceſſion of prophets, with the ſame propriety that you can to Jeſus Chriſt;—*The Lord thy God will raiſe up unto thee a Prophet, from the midſt of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ſhall ye hearken.* If you think this

ambiguous or obſcure, I anſwer, That it is not a hiſtory, but a prophecy; and as ſuch unavoidably liable to ſome degree of obſcurity, till interpreted by the event.

Nor was the conduct of the Apoſtles more ambiguous, than the language of the old Teſtament; they did not indeed at firſt comprehend the whole of the nature of the new diſpenſation; and when they did underſtand it better, they did not think proper upon every occaſion to uſe their Chriſtian liberty; but with true Chriſtian charity, accommodated themſelves in matters of indifference to the prejudices of their weaker brethren. But he who changes his conduct with a change of ſentiments, proceeding from an increaſe of knowledge, is not ambiguous in his conduct; nor ſhould he be accuſed of a culpable duplicity, who in a matter of the laſt importance endeavours to conciliate the good-will of all, by conforming in a few innocent obſervances to the particular perſuaſions of different men.

One remark more, and I have done. In your account of the Gnoſtics, you have given us a very minute catalogue of the objections, which they made to the authority of Moſes, from

from his account of the creation, of the patriarchs, of the law, and of the attributes of the Deity: I have not leiſure to examine, whether the Gnoſtics of former ages really made all the objections you have mentioned. I take it for granted, upon your authority, that they did: But I am certain if they did, that the Gnoſtics of modern times have no reaſon to be puffed up with their knowledge, or to be had in admiration as men of ſubtle penetration or refined erudition; they are all miſerable copiers of their brethren of antiquity; and neither Morgan, nor Tindal, nor Bolingbroke, nor Voltaire, have been able to produce ſcarce a ſingle new objection. You think that the Fathers have not properly anſwered the Gnoſtics. I make no queſtion, Sir, you are able to anſwer them to your own ſatisfaction; and informed of every thing that has been ſaid by our *induſtrious divines* upon the ſubject: And we ſhould have been glad, if it had fallen in with your plan to have adminiſtered together with the poiſon its antidote; but ſince that is not the caſe, leſt its malignity ſhould ſpread too far, I muſt juſt mention it to my younger readers, that Leland and others, in their replies to the modern Deiſts,

have given very full, and, as many learned men apprehend, very ſatisfactory anſwers to every one of the objections, which you have derived from the Gnoſtic hereſy.

I am, &c.

LETTER

LETTER SECOND.

SIR,

"THE doctrine of a future life, improved by every additional circumſtance which could give weight and efficacy to that important truth," is the ſecond of the cauſes to which you attribute the quick increaſe of Chriſtianity. Now if we impartially conſider the circumſtances of the perſons, to whom the doctrine, not ſimply of a future life, but of a future life accompanied with puniſhments as well as rewards; not only of the immortality of the ſoul, but of the immortality of the ſoul accompanied with that of the reſurrection, was delivered; I cannot be of opinion that, abſtracted from the ſupernatural teſtimony by which it was enforced, it could have met with any very extenſive reception amongſt them.

It was not that kind of future life, which they expected; it did not hold out to them the puniſhments of the infernal regions, as *aniles fabulas*: To the queſtion, *Quid ſi poſt mortem maneant animi?* they could not anſwer with Cicero and the philoſophers,—*Beatos eſſe concedo*;—becauſe there was a great probability, that it might be quite otherwiſe with them. I am not to learn, that there are paſſages to be picked up in the writings of the antients, which might be produced as proofs of their expecting a future ſtate of puniſhment for the flagitious; but this opinion was worn out of credit, before the time of our Saviour: The whole diſputation in the firſt book of the Tuſculan Queſtions, goes upon the other ſuppoſition; Nor was the abſurdity of the doctrine of future puniſhments confined to the writings of the philoſophers, or the circles of the learned and polite; for Cicero, to mention no others, makes no ſecret of it in his public pleadings before the people at large. You yourſelf, Sir, have referred to his oration for Cluentius; in this oration, you may remember he makes great mention of a very abandoned fellow, who had forged I know not how many wills, murdered I know not how many

many wives, and perpetrated a thouſand other villanies; yet even to this profligate, by name Oppianicus, he is perſuaded, that death was not the occaſion of any evil.* Hence, I think, we may conclude, that ſuch of the Romans, as were not wholly infected with the annihilating notions of Epicurus, but entertained (whether from remote tradition, or enlightened argumentation) hopes of a future life, had no manner of expectation of ſuch a life, as included in it the ſeverity of puniſhment, denounced in the Chriſtian ſcheme againſt the wicked.

Nor was it that kind of future life, which they wiſhed; they would have been glad enough of an Elyſium, which could have admitted into it men who had ſpent this life in the perpetration of every vice, which can debaſe and polſute the human heart. To abandon every ſeducing gratification of ſenſe, to pluck up every latent root of ambition, to ſubdue every impulſe of revenge, to diveſt themſelves of every inveterate habit, in which their glory and their pleaſure

* Nam nunc quidem quid tandem mali illi mors attulit? niſi forte ineptiis ac fabulis ducimur, ut exiſtimemus apud inferos impiorum ſupplicia perferre; ac plures illic offendiſſe inimicos quam hic reliquiſſe—quæ ſi falſa ſint, id quod omnes intelligunt, &c.

pleaſure conſiſted; to do all this and more, before they could look up to the doctrine of a future life, without terror and amazement, was not, one would think, an eaſy undertaking; nor was it likely, that many would forſake the religious inſtitutions of their anceſtors, ſet at nought the gods, under whoſe auſpices the Capitol had been founded, and Rome made miſtreſs of the world, and ſuffer themſelves to be perſuaded into the belief of a tenet, the very mention of which made Felix tremble, by any thing leſs than a full conviction of the ſupernatural authority of thoſe who taught it.

The ſeveral ſchools of Gentile philoſophy had diſcuſſed, with no ſmall ſubtlety, every argument, which reaſon could ſuggeſt, for and againſt the immortality of the ſoul; and thoſe uncertain glimmerings of the light of nature, would have prepared the minds of the learned for the reception of the full illuſtration of this ſubject by the goſpel, had not the reſurrection been a part of the doctrine therein advanced. But that this corporal frame, which is hourly mouldering away, and reſolved at laſt into the undiſtinguiſhed maſs of elements, from which it was at firſt derived, ſhould ever be *clothed with immortality*;

mortality; that this corruptible ſhould ever *put on incorruption*, is a truth ſo far removed from the apprehenſion of philoſophical reſearch, ſo diſſonant from the common conceptions of mankind, that amongſt all ranks and perſuaſions of men it was eſteemed an impoſſible thing. At Athens the philoſophers had liſtened with patience to St. Paul, whilſt they conceived him but a *ſetter forth of ſtrange gods*; but as ſoon as they comprehended, that by the αναστασις, he meant the reſurrection, they turned from him with contempt. It was principally the inſiſting upon the ſame topic, which made Feſtus think, *that much learning had made him mad*: And the queſtions, *how are the dead raiſed up? and, with what body do they come?* ſeem, by Paul's ſolicitude to anſwer them with fulneſs and preciſion, to have been not unfrequently propoſed to him, by thoſe who were deſirous of becoming Chriſtians.

The doctrine of a future life then, as promulged in the goſpel, being neither agreeable to the expectations, nor correſponding with the wiſhes, nor conformable to the reaſon of the Gentiles, I can diſcover no motive (ſetting aſide the true one, the divine power of its firſt preachers) which could induce them to receive it; and in conſequence

quence of their belief, to conform their looſe morals to the rigid ſtandard of goſpel purity, upon the mere authority of a few contemptible fiſhermen of Judea. And even you yourſelf, Sir, ſeem to have changed your opinion concerning the efficacy of the expectation of a future life in converting the Heathens, when you obſerve in the following chapter, that "the Pagan multitude reſerving their gratitude for temporal benefits alone, rejected the ineſtimable preſent of life and immortality, which was offered to mankind by Jeſus of Nazareth."

MONTESQUIEU is of opinion, that it will ever be impoſſible for Chriſtianity to eſtabliſh itſelf in China and the Eaſt, from this circumſtance, that it prohibits a plurality of wives: How then could it have been poſſible for it to have pervaded the voluptuous Capital, and traverſed the utmoſt limits of the empire of Rome, by the feeble efforts of human induſtry or human knavery?

BUT the Gentiles, you are of opinion, were converted by their fears; and reckon the doctrines of Chriſt's ſpeedy appearance, of the millennium, and of the general conflagration, amongſt thoſe additional circumſtances, which gave weight to that concerning a future ſtate. Before

fore I proceed to the examination of the efficiency of theſe ſeveral circumſtances, in alarming the apprehenſions of the Gentiles, what if I ſhould grant your poſition? ſtill the main queſtion recurs, From what ſource did they derive the fears, which converted them? Not ſurely from the mere human labours of men, who were every where ſpoken againſt, made a ſpectacle of, and conſidered as the filth of the world, and the offſcouring of all things—not ſurely from the human powers of him, who profeſſed himſelf *rude in ſpeech, in bodily preſence contemptible*, and a deſpiſer of *the excellency of ſpeech, and the enticing words of men's wiſdom.* No, ſuch wretched inſtruments were but ill fitted, to inſpire the haughty, and the learned Romans, with any other paſſions than thoſe of pity, or contempt.

Now, Sir, if you pleaſe, we will conſider that univerſal expectation of the approaching end of the world, which you think had ſuch great influence in converting the Pagans to the profeſſion of Chriſtianity. The near approach, you ſay, of this wonderful event had been predicted by the Apoſtles, "though the revolution of ſeventeen centuries has inſtructed us, not to preſs too cloſely the myſterious language of prophecy

prophecy and revelation." That this opinion, even in the times of the Apoſtles, had made its way into the Chriſtian church, I readily admit; but that the Apoſtles ever either predicted this event to others, or cheriſhed the expectation of it in themſelves, does not ſeem probable to me. As this is a point of ſome difficulty and importance, you will ſuffer me to explain it at ſome length.

It muſt be owned, that there are ſeveral paſſages in the writings of the Apoſtles, which, at the firſt view, ſeem to countenance the opinion you have adopted. *Now*, ſays St. Paul, in his epiſtle to the Romans, *it is high time to awake out of ſleep; for now is our ſalvation nearer than when we believed: The night is far ſpent, the day is at hand.* And in his firſt epiſtle to the Theſſalonians, he comforts ſuch of them as were ſorrowing for the loſs of their friends, by aſſuring them, that they were not loſt forever; but that the Lord, when he came, would bring them with him; and that they would not, in the participation of any bleſſings, be in any wiſe behind thoſe, who ſhould happen then to be alive; *we*, ſays he (the Chriſtians of whatever age or country, agreeable to a frequent uſe of the pronoun *we*)

which

which are alive, and remain unto the coming of the Lord, ſhall not prevent them which are aſleep; for the Lord himſelf ſhall deſcend from heaven with a ſhout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God, and the dead in Chriſt ſhall riſe firſt: Then, we which are alive and remain, ſhall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord. In his epiſtle to the Philippians, he exhorts his Chriſtian brethren not to diſquiet themſelves with carking cares about their temporal concerns, from this powerful conſideration, that the Lord was at hand; *let your moderation be known unto all men; the Lord is at hand; be careful about nothing.* The Apoſtle to the Hebrews inculcates the ſame doctrine, admoniſhing his converts *to provoke one another to love, and to good works; and ſo much the more, as they ſaw the day approaching.* The age in which the Apoſtles lived, is frequently called by them the end of the world, the laſt days, the laſt hour. I think it unneceſſary, Sir, to trouble you with an explication of theſe and other ſimilar texts of Scripture, which are uſually adduced in ſupport of your opinion; ſince I hope to be able to give you a direct proof, that the Apoſtles neither comforted themſelves, nor encouraged

others

others with the delightful hope of ſeeing their Maſter coming again into the world. It is evident then, that St. John, who ſurvived all the other Apoſtles, could not have had any ſuch expectation; ſince in the Book of the Revelation, the future events of the Chriſtian church, which were not to take place, many of them, till a long ſeries of years after his death, and ſome of which have not yet been accompliſhed, are there minutely deſcribed. St. Peter, in like manner, ſtrongly intimates, that the day of the Lord might be ſaid to be at hand, though it was at the diſtance of a thouſand years or more; for in replying to the taunt of thoſe who did then, or ſhould in future aſk, *Where is the promiſe of his coming?* he ſays, *Beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thouſand years, and a thouſand years as one day: The Lord is not ſlack concerning his promiſe, as ſome men count ſlackneſs.* And he ſpeaks of putting off his tabernacle, as the Lord had ſhewed him; and of his endeavour, that the Chriſtians after his deceaſe might be able to have theſe things in remembrance: So that it is paſt a doubt, he could not be of opinion, that the Lord would come in his time. As to St. Paul, upon a par-

a partial view of whoſe writings the doctrine concerning the ſpeedy coming of Chriſt is principally founded; it is manifeſt, that he was conſcious he ſhould not live to ſee it, notwithſtanding the expreſſion before mentioned, *we which are alive*; for he foretels his own death in expreſs terms—*the time of my departure is at hand*; and he ſpeaks of his reward, not as immediately to be conferred on him; but as laid up, and reſerved for him till ſome future day—*I have fought a good fight, I have finiſhed my courſe; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteouſneſs, which the Lord, the righteous judge, ſhall give me at that day.* There is moreover one paſſage in his writings, which is ſo expreſs, and full to the purpoſe, that it will put the matter, I think, beyond all doubt; it occurs in his ſecond Epiſtle to the Theſſalonians: They, it ſeems, had either by miſrepreſenting ſome parts of his former letter to them, or by the preaching of ſome, who had not the ſpirit of truth; by ſome means or other, they had been led to expect the ſpeedy coming of Chriſt, and been greatly diſturbed in mind upon that account: To remove this error, he writes to them in the following very ſolemn and affectionate

manner; *We beſeech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not ſoon ſhaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by ſpirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of the Lord is at hand; let no man deceive you by any means.* He then goes on to deſcribe a falling away, a great corruption of the Chriſtian church, which was to happen before the day of the Lord: Now by this revelation of the man of ſin, this myſtery of iniquity, which is to be conſumed with the ſpirit of his mouth, deſtroyed with the brightneſs of his coming, we have every reaſon to believe, is to be underſtood the paſt and preſent abominations of the church of Rome. How then can it be ſaid of Paul, who clearly foreſaw this corruption above ſeventeen hundred years ago, that he expected the coming of the Lord in his own day? Let us preſs, Sir, the myſterious language of prophecy and revelation, as cloſely as you pleaſe; but let us preſs it truly; and we may, perhaps, find reaſon from thence to receive, with leſs reluctance, a religion which deſcribes a corruption, the ſtrangeneſs of which, had it not been foretold in unequivocal terms, might have amazed even a friend to Chriſtianity.

I WILL

I WILL produce you, Sir, a prophecy, which the more closely you press it, the more reason you will have to believe, that the speedy coming of Christ could never have been *predicted* by the Apostles. Take it, as translated by Bishop Newton: *But the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times, some shall apostatize from the faith; giving heed to erroneous spirits, and doctrines concerning demons, through the hypocrisy of liars; having their conscience seared with a red hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats.*—Here you have an express prophecy—the Spirit hath spoken it—that in the latter times—not immediately, but at some distant period—some should apostatize from the faith—some, who had been Christians, should in truth be so no longer—but should give heed to erroneous spirits, and doctrines concerning demons:—Press this expression closely, and you may, perhaps, discover in it the erroneous tenets, and the demon, or saint worship of the church of Rome;—through the hypocrisy of liars:—You recognize, no doubt, the priesthood, and the martyrologists;—having their conscience seared with a red hot iron:—Callous, indeed, must his conscience be, who traf-

fics in indulgences ;—forbidding to marry, and commanding to abſtain from meats :—This language needs no preſſing ; it diſcovers, at once, the unhappy votaries of monaſtic life, and the mortal ſin of eating fleſh on faſt days.

If, notwithſtanding what has been ſaid, you ſhould ſtill be of opinion, that the Apoſtles expected Chriſt would come in their time; it will not follow, that this their error ought in any wiſe to diminiſh their authority as preachers of the Goſpel. I am ſenſible this poſition may alarm even ſome well-wiſhers to Chriſtianity ; and ſupply its enemies with, what they will think, an irrefragable argument : The Apoſtles, they will ſay, were inſpired with the ſpirit of truth ; and yet they fell into a groſs miſtake, concerning a matter of great importance ; how is this to be reconciled? Perhaps, in the following manner : When the time of our Saviour's miniſtry was nearly at an end, he thought proper to raiſe the ſpirits of his diſciples, who were quite caſt down with what he had told them about his deſign of leaving them ; by promiſing, that he would ſend to them the Holy Ghoſt, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth ; who ſhould teach them all things, and lead them into

into all truth. And we know, that this his promiſe was accompliſhed on the day of Pentecoſt, when they were all filled with the Holy Ghoſt; and we know farther, that from that time forward, they were enabled to ſpeak with tongues, to work miracles, to preach the word with power, and to comprehend the myſtery of the new diſpenſation, which was committed unto them. But we have no reaſon from hence to conclude, that they were immediately inſpired with the apprehenſion of whatever might be known; that they became acquainted with all kinds of truth: They were undoubtedly led into ſuch truths, as it was neceſſary for them to know, in order to their converting the world to Chriſtianity; but in other things, they were probably left to the exerciſe of their underſtandings, as other men uſually are. But ſurely they might be proper witneſſes of the life and reſurrection of Chriſt, though they were not acquainted with every thing, which might have been known; though in particular, they were ignorant of the preciſe time, when our Lord would come to judge the world. It can be no impeachment, either of their integrity as men, or their ability as hiſtorians, or their honeſty as

preachers of the goſpel, that they were unacquainted with what had never been revealed to them; that they followed their own underſtandings, where they had no better light to guide them; ſpeaking from conjecture, when they could not ſpeak from certainty; of themſelves, when they had no commandment of the Lord. They knew but in part, and they propheſied but in part; and concerning this particular point, Jeſus himſelf had told them, juſt as he was about finally to leave them, that it was not for them to *know the times and the ſeaſons, which the Father had put in his own power.* Nor is it to be wondered at, that the Apoſtles were left in a ſtate of uncertainty, concerning the time in which Chriſt ſhould appear; ſince Beings, far more exalted and more highly favoured of heaven than they, were under an equal degree of ignorance; *Of that day*, ſays our Saviour, *and of that hour, knoweth no one; no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father only.* I am afraid, Sir, I have tired you with ſcripture quotations; but if I have been fortunate enough to convince you, either that the ſpeedy coming of Chriſt was never expected, much leſs *predicted*, by the Apoſtles; or that their miſtake in that particular

particular expectation, can in no degree diminiſh the general weight of their teſtimony as hiſtorians, I ſhall not be ſorry for the *ennui* I may have occaſioned you.

THE doctrine of the Millennium, is the ſecond of the circumſtances which you produce, as giving weight to that of a future ſtate; and you repreſent this doctrine as having been "carefully inculcated by a ſucceſſion of the fathers, from Juſtin Martyr and Irenæus down to Lactantius;" and obſerve, that when "the edifice of the church was almoſt completed, the temporary ſupport was laid aſide;" and in the notes, you refer us, as a proof of what you advance, to "Irenæus, the diſciple of Papias, who had ſeen the Apoſtle St. John," and to the ſecond Dialogue of Juſtin with Trypho.

I WISH, Sir, you had turned to Euſebius, for the character of this Papias, who had ſeen the Apoſtle St. John; you would there have found him repreſented as little better than a credulous old woman; very averſe from reading, but mightily given to picking up ſtories and traditions next to fabulous; amongſt which Euſebius reckons this of the Millennium one. Nor is it, I apprehend, quite certain, that Pa-

pias ever ſaw, much leſs diſcourſed, as ſeems to be inſinuated, with the Apoſtle St. John. Euſebius thinks rather, that it was John the preſbyter he had ſeen. But what if he had ſeen the Apoſtle himſelf? many a weak-headed man had undoubtedly ſeen him, as well as Papias; and it would be hard indeed upon Chriſtians, if they were compelled to receive as apoſtolical traditions, the wild reveries of antient enthuſiaſm, or ſuch crude conceptions of ignorant fanaticiſm, as nothing but the ruſt of antiquity can render venerable.

As to the works of Juſtin, the very Dialogue you refer to contains a proof, that the doctrine of the Millennium had not, even in his time, the univerſal reception you have ſuppoſed; but that many Chriſtians of pure and pious principles rejected it. I wonder how this paſſage eſcaped you; but it may be, that you followed Tillotſon, who himſelf followed Mede, and read in the original ε, inſtead of αυ; and thus unwarily violated the idiom of the language, the ſenſe of the context, and the authority of the beſt editions*. In the note

* Juſtin, in anſwering the queſtion propoſed by Trypho, whether the Chriſtians believed the doctrine of the

note you obſerve, that it is unneceſſary for you to mention all the intermediate fathers between Juſtin and Lactantius, as the fact, you ſay, is not diſputed. In a man, who has read ſo many books, and to ſo good a purpoſe, he muſt be captious indeed, who cannot excuſe ſmall miſtakes: That unprejudiced regard to truth, however, which is the great characteriſtic of every diſtinguiſhed hiſtorian, will, I am perſuaded, make you thank me for recalling to your memory, that Origen, the moſt learned of all the fathers, and Dionyſius, biſhop of Alexandria, uſually for his immenſe erudition ſurnamed the Great, were both of them prior to Lactantius, and both of them impugners of the Millennium doctrine. Look, Sir, into Moſheim, or almoſt

the Millennium, ſays, Ωμολογησα σοι και προτερον, οτι εγω μεν και αλλοι πολλοι ταυτα φρονουμεν, ως και παντως επιστασθε, τουτο γεγνησομενον. Πολλης δ' αυ και των της ΚΑΘΑΡΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΕΥΣΕΒΟΥΣ οντων Χριστιανων ΓΝΩΜΗΣ τουτο μη γνωριζειν, ετημανα σοι. The note ſubjoined to this paſſage out of Juſtin, in Thirlby's Ed. an. 1722, is, [Πολλης δ' αυ και των της καθαρας.] Medus (quem ſequitur Tillotſonus, Reg. Fidei per. iii. ſect. 9, p. 756, & ſeq.) legit των ε της καθαρας. Vehementer errant viri præclari.

And in Jebb's Edit. an. 1719, we have the following note: Doctrina itaque de Millennio, neque erat univerſalis eccleſiæ traditio, nec opinio de fide recepta, &c.

moſt any writer of eccleſiaſtical hiſtory; and you will find the oppoſition of Origen and Dionyſius to this ſyſtem particularly noticed: Look into ſo common an author as Whitby; and in his learned treatiſe upon this ſubject, you will find he has well proved theſe two propoſitions; firſt, that this opinion of the Millennium was never generally received in the church of Chriſt; ſecondly, that there is no juſt ground to think it was derived from the Apoſtles. From hence I think we may conclude, that this Millennium doctrine (which, by the bye, though it be new modelled, is not yet thrown aſide) could not have been any very ſerviceable ſcaffold, in the erection of that mighty edifice, which has cruſhed by the weight of its materials, and debaſed by the elegance of its ſtructure, the ſtatelieſt temples of heathen ſuperſtition. With theſe remarks, I take leave of the Millennium; juſt obſerving, that your third circumſtance, the general conflagration, ſeems to be effectually included in your firſt, the ſpeedy coming of Chriſt.

I am, &c.

LETTER

LETTER THIRD.

SIR,

YOU eſteem "the miraculous powers aſcribed to the primitive church," as the third of the ſecondary cauſes of the rapid growth of Chriſtianity; I ſhould be willing to account the miracles, not merely aſcribed to the primitive church, but really performed by the Apoſtles, as the one great primary cauſe of the converſion of the Gentiles. But waving this conſideration, let us ſee whether the miraculous powers, which you aſcribe to the primitive church, were in any eminent degree calculated to ſpread the belief of Chriſtianity amongſt a great and an enlightened people.

THEY conſiſted, you tell us, "of divine inſpirations, conveyed ſometimes in the form of a ſleeping, ſometimes of a waking viſion; and were liberally beſtowed on all ranks of the

the faithful, on women as on elders, on boys as well as upon Biſhops." "The deſign of theſe viſions, you ſay, was for the moſt part either to diſcloſe the future hiſtory, or to guide the preſent adminiſtration of the church." "You ſpeak of the expulſion of demons as an ordinary triumph of religion, uſually performed in a public manner; and when the patient was relieved by the ſkill or the power of the exorciſt, the vanquiſhed demon was heard to confeſs, that he was one of the fabled gods of antiquity, who had impiouſly uſurped the adoration of mankind;" and you repreſent even the miracle of the reſurrection of the dead, as frequently performed on neceſſary occaſions.—Caſt your eye, Sir, upon the church of Rome, and aſk yourſelf (I put the queſtion to your heart, and beg you will conſult that for an anſwer; aſk yourſelf) whether her abſurd pretenſions to that very kind of miraculous powers, you have here diſplayed as operating to the increaſe of Chriſtianity, have not converted half her numbers to Proteſtaniſm, and the other half to infidelity? Neither the ſword of the civil magiſtrate, nor the poſſeſſion of the keys of heaven, nor the terrors of her ſpiritual thunder,

thunder, have been able to keep within her pale, even thoſe who have been bred up in her faith; how then ſhould you think, that the very cauſe, which hath almoſt extinguiſhed Chriſtianity amongſt Chriſtians, ſhould have eſtabliſhed it amongſt Pagans? I beg I may not be miſunderſtood; I do not take upon me to ſay, that all the miracles recorded in the hiſtory of the primitive church after the apoſtolical age, were forgeries; it is foreign to the preſent purpoſe to deliver any opinion upon that ſubject; but I do beg leave to inſiſt upon this, that ſuch of them as were forgeries, muſt in that learned age, by their eaſy detection, have rather impeded, than accelerated the progreſs of Chriſtianity: And it appears very probable to me, that nothing but the recent prevailing evidence, of real, unqueſtioned, apoſtolical miracles, could have ſecured the infant church from being deſtroyed by thoſe, which were falſely aſcribed to it.

It is not every man, who can nicely ſeparate the corruptions of religion from religion itſelf; nor juſtly apportion the degrees of credit due to the diverſities of evidence; and

and thoſe, who have ability for the taſk, are uſually ready enough to emancipate themſelves from goſpel reſtraints (which thwart the propenſities of ſenſe, check the ebullitions of paſſion, and combat the prejudices of the world at every turn) by blending its native ſimplicity with the ſuperſtitions which have been derived from it. No argument ſo well ſuited to the indolence or the immorality of mankind, as that prieſts of all ages and religions are the ſame; we ſee the pretenſions of the Romiſh prieſthood to miraculous powers, and we know them to be falſe; we are conſcious, that they at leaſt muſt ſacrifice their integrity to their intereſt, or their ambition; and being perſuaded, that there is a great ſameneſs in the paſſions of mankind, and in their incentives to action; and knowing that the hiſtory of paſt ages is abundantly ſtored with ſimilar claims to ſupernatural authority, we traverſe back in imagination the moſt diſtant regions of antiquity; and finding from a ſuperficial view nothing to diſcriminate one ſet of men or period of time from another; we haſtily conclude, that all revealed religion is a cheat, and that

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the miracles attributed to the Apoſtles themſelves, are ſupported by no better teſtimony, nor more worthy our attention, than the prodigies of Pagan ſtory, or the lying wonders of Papal artifice. I have no intention in this place, to enlarge upon the many circumſtances, by which a candid enquirer after truth might be enabled to diſtinguiſh a pointed difference between the miracles of Chriſt and his Apoſtles, and the tricks of ancient or modern ſuperſtition. One obſervation I would juſt ſuggeſt to you upon the ſubject; the miracles recorded in the old and new Teſtament, are ſo intimately united with the narration of common events, and the ordinary tranſactions of life, that you cannot, as in profane hiſtory, ſeparate the one from the other.—My meaning will be illuſtrated by an inſtance; Tacitus and Suetonius have handed down to us an account of many great actions performed by Veſpaſian; amongſt the reſt, they inform us of his having wrought ſome miracles, of his having cured a lame man, and reſtored ſight to one that was blind.—But what they tell of theſe miracles, is ſo unconnected with every thing that goes before and after, that you may reject the relation

tion of them without injuring, in any degree, the conſiſtency of the narration of the other circumſtances of his life: On the other hand, if you reject the relation of the miracles ſaid to have been performed by Jeſus Chriſt, you muſt neceſſarily reject the account of his whole life, and of ſeveral tranſactions, concerning which we have the undoubted teſtimony of other writers beſides the Evangeliſts. But if this argument ſhould not ſtrike you, perhaps the following obſervation may tend to remove a little of the prejudice, uſually conceived againſt goſpel miracles, by men of lively imaginations, from the groſs forgeries attributed to the firſt ages of the church.

The phænomena of phyſics are ſometimes happily illuſtrated by an hypotheſis; and the moſt recondite truths of mathematical ſcience not unfrequently inveſtigated, from an abſurd poſition; what if we ſhould try the ſame method of arguing in the caſe before us. Let us ſuppoſe then, that a new revelation was to be promulged to mankind, and that twelve unlearned and unfriended men, inhabitants of any country moſt odious and deſpicable in the eyes of Europe, ſhould by the power of God

God be endowed with the faculty of ſpeaking languages they had never learned, and performing works ſurpaſſing all human ability; and that being ſtrongly impreſſed with a particular truth, which they were commiſſioned to promulgate, they ſhould travel not only through the barbarous regions of Africa, but through all the learned and poliſhed ſtates of Europe; preaching every where with unremitted ſedulity a new religion, working ſtupendous miracles in atteſtation of their miſſion, and communicating to their firſt converts (as a ſeal of their converſion) a variety of ſpiritual gifts; does it appear probable to you, that after the death of theſe men, and probably after the deaths of moſt of their immediate ſucceſſors, who had been zealouſly attached to the faith they had ſeen ſo miraculouſly confirmed, that none would ever attempt to impoſe upon the credulous or the ignorant, by a fictitious claim to ſupernatural powers? would none of them aſpire to the gift of tongues? would none of them miſtake phrenzy for illumination, and the deluſions of a heated brain for the impulſes of the ſpirit? would none undertake to cure inveterate diſorders, to expel demons, or to raiſe the

dead? As far as I can apprehend, we ought, from ſuch a poſition, to deduce, by every rule of probable reaſoning, the preciſe concluſion which was in fact verified in the caſe of the Apoſtles; every ſpecies of miracles, which heaven had enabled the firſt preachers to perform, would be counterfeited, either from miſguided zeal, or intereſted cunning; either through the imbecility or the iniquity of mankind; and we might juſt as reaſonably conclude, that there never was any piety, charity or chaſtity in the world, from ſeeing ſuch plenty of pretenders to theſe virtues, as that there never were any real miracles performed, from conſidering the great ſtore of thoſe which have been forged.

But, I know not how it has happened, there are many in the preſent age (I am far from including you, Sir, in the number) whoſe prejudices againſt all miraculous events have ariſen to that height, that it appears to them utterly impoſſible for any human teſtimony, however great, to eſtabliſh their credibility. I beg pardon for ſtiling their reaſoning, prejudice; I have no deſign to give offence by that word; they may, with equal right, throw

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the ſame imputation upon mine; and I think it juſt as illiberal in divines, to attribute the ſcepticiſm of every Deiſt to wilful infidelity, as it is in the Deiſts, to refer the faith of every Divine to profeſſional bias. I have not had ſo little intercourſe with mankind, nor ſhunned ſo much the delightful freedom of ſocial converſe, as to be ignorant, that there are many men of upright morals and good underſtandings, to whom, as you expreſs it, "a latent and even involuntary ſcepticiſm adheres;" and who would be glad to be perſuaded to be Chriſtians: And how ſevere ſoever ſome men may be in their judgments concerning one another; yet we Chriſtians at leaſt, hope, and believe, that the great Judge of all will make allowance for "our habits of ſtudy and reflection," for various circumſtances, the efficacy of which, in giving a particular bent to the underſtandings of men, we can neither comprehend nor eſtimate. For the ſake of ſuch men, if ſuch ſhould ever be induced to throw an hour away in the peruſal of theſe letters, ſuffer me to ſtep for a moment out of my way,

whilſt I hazard an obſervation or two upon the ſubject.

KNOWLEDGE is rightly divided by Mr. Locke into intuitive, ſenſitive, and demonſtrative; it is clear, that a paſt miracle can neither be the object of ſenſe, nor of intuition, nor conſequently of demonſtration; we cannot then, philoſophically ſpeaking, be ſaid to know, that a miracle has ever been performed. But in all the great concerns of life, we are influenced by probability, rather than knowledge: And of probability, the ſame great author eſtabliſhes two foundations; a conformity to our own experience, and the teſtimony of others. Now it is contended, that by the oppoſition of theſe two principles, probability is deſtroyed; or, in other terms, that human teſtimony can never influence the mind to aſſent to a propoſition repugnant to uniform experience.—Whoſe experience do you mean? you will not ſay your own; for the experience of an individual reaches but a little way; and no doubt you daily aſſent to a thouſand truths in politics, in phyſics, and in the buſineſs of common

mon life, which you have never ſeen verified by experience.—You will not produce the experience of your friends; for that can extend itſelf but a little way beyond your own.—But by uniform experience, I conceive, you are deſirous of underſtanding the experience of all ages and nations ſince the foundation of the world. I anſwer, firſt; how is it, that you become acquainted with the experience of all ages and nations? You will reply, from hiſtory.—Be it ſo:—Peruſe then, by far the moſt ancient records of antiquity; and if you find no mention of miracles in them, I give up the point. Yes;—but every thing related therein reſpecting miracles, is to be reckoned fabulous.—Why?—Becauſe miracles contradict the experience of all ages and nations. Do you not perceive, Sir, that you beg the very queſtion in debate? for we affirm, that the great and learned nation of Egypt, that the Heathen inhabiting the land of Canaan, that the numerous people of the Jews, and the nations, which, for ages, ſurrounded them, have all had great experience of miracles. You cannot otherways ob-

viate this concluſion, than by queſtioning the authenticity of that book, concerning which, Newton, when he was writing his Commentary on Daniel, expreſſed himſelf to the perſon *, from whom I had the anecdote, and which deſerves not to be loſt; "I find more ſure marks of authenticity in the Bible, than in any profane hiſtory whatſoever."

However, I mean not to preſs you with the argument *ad verecundiam*; it is needleſs to ſolicit your modeſty, when it may be poſſible, perhaps, to make an impreſſion upon your judgment: I anſwer, therefore, in the ſecond place, that the admiſſion of the principle, by which you reject miracles, will lead us into abſurdity. The laws of gravitation, are the moſt obvious of all the laws of nature; every perſon in every part of the globe, muſt of neceſſity have had experience of them: There was a time, when no one was acquainted with the laws of magnetiſm; theſe ſuſpend in many inſtances the laws of gravity; nor can I ſee, upon the principle in queſtion, how the reſt of mankind could have credited the teſtimony of their firſt diſcoverer;

* Dr. Smith, late Maſter of Trinity College.

verer; and yet to have rejected it, would have been to reject the truth. But that a piece of iron ſhould aſcend gradually from the earth, and fly at laſt with an increaſing rapidity through the air; and attaching itſelf to another piece of iron, or to a particular ſpecies of iron ore, ſhould remain ſuſpended in oppoſition to the action of its gravity, is conſonant to the laws of nature.—I grant it; but there was a time when it was contrary, I ſay not to the laws of nature, but to the uniform experience of all preceding ages and countries; and at that particular point of time, the teſtimony of an individual, or of a dozen individuals, who ſhould have reported themſelves eye witneſſes of ſuch a fact, ought, according to your argumentation, to have been received as fabulous. And what are thoſe laws of nature, which, you think, can never be ſuſpended? are they not different to different men, according to the diverſities of their comprehenſion and knowledge? and if any one of them (that, for inſtance, which rules the operations of magnetiſm or electricity) ſhould have been known to you or to me alone, whilſt all the reſt of the world were unac-

quainted with it; the effects of it would have been new, and unheard of in the annals, and contrary to the experience of mankind; and therefore ought not, in your opinion, to have been believed. Nor do I underſtand, what difference, as to credibility, there could be, between the effects of ſuch an unknown law of nature, and a miracle; for it is a matter of no moment, in that view, whether the ſuſpenſion of the known laws of nature be effected; that is, whether a miracle be performed, by the mediation of other laws that are unknown, or by the miniſtry of a perſon divinely commiſſioned; ſince it is impoſſible for us to be certain, that it is contradictory to the conſtitution of the univerſe, that the laws of nature, which appear to us general, ſhould not be ſuſpended, and their action overruled by others, ſtill more general, though leſs known; that is, that miracles ſhould not be performed before ſuch a Being as Man, at thoſe times, in thoſe in places, and under thoſe circumſtances, which God, in his univerſal providence, had preordained.

I am, &c.

LETTER

LETTER FOURTH.

SIR,

I READILY acknowledge the utility of your fourth cauſe, "the virtues of the firſt Chriſtians," as greatly conducing to the ſpreading their religion; but then you ſeem to quite mar the compliment you pay them, by repreſenting their virtues, as proceeding either from their repentance for having been the moſt abandoned ſinners, or from the laudable deſire of ſupporting the reputation of the ſociety, in which they were engaged.

THAT repentance is the firſt ſtep to virtue, is true enough; but I ſee no reaſon for ſuppoſing, according to the calumnies of Celſus and Julian, "that the Chriſtians allured into their party, men, who waſhed away in the waters of baptiſm the guilt, for which the temples of the gods refuſed

refuſed to grant them any expiation." The Apoſtles, Sir, did not, like Romulus, open an aſylum for debtors, thieves, and murderers; for they had not the ſame ſturdy means of ſecuring their adherents from the graſp of civil power; they did not perſuade them to abandon the temples of the gods, becauſe they could there obtain no expiation for their guilt; but becauſe every degree of guilt was expiated in them with too great facility; and every vice practiſed, not only without remorſe of private conſcience, but with the powerful ſanction of public approbation.

"AFTER the example, you ſay, of their Divine Maſter, the miſſionaries of the goſpel addreſſed themſelves to men, and eſpecially to women, oppreſſed by the conſcioufneſs, and very often by the effects of their vices."—This, Sir, I really think is not a fair repreſentation of the matter; it may catch the applauſe of the unlearned, embolden many a ſtripling to caſt off forever the ſweet bluſh of modeſty, confirm many a diſſolute veteran in the practice of his impure habits, and ſuggeſt great occaſion of merriment and wanton mockery to the flagitious of every denomination and every age; but

but ſtill it will want that foundation of truth, which alone can recommend it to the ſerious and judicious. The Apoſtles, Sir, were not like the Italian *Fratricelli* of the thirteenth, nor the French *Turlupins* of the fourteenth century; in all the dirt that has been raked up againſt Chriſtianity, even by the worſt of its enemies, not a ſpeck of that kind have they been able to fix, either upon the Apoſtles, or their Divine Maſter. The goſpel of Jeſus Chriſt, Sir, was not preached in ſingle houſes, or obſcure villages, not in ſubterraneous caves and impure brothels, not in lazars and in priſons; but in the ſynagogues and in the temples, in the ſtreets and in the market-places of the great capitals of the Roman provinces; in Jeruſalem, in Corinth, and in Antioch, in Athens, in Epheſus, and in Rome. Nor do I any where find, that its miſſionaries were ordered particularly to addreſs themſelves to the ſhameleſs women you mention; I do indeed find the direct contrary; for they were ordered to turn away from, to have no fellowſhip or intercourſe with ſuch, as were wont *to creep into houſes, and lead captive ſilly women laden with ſins, led away with divers luſts.* And what if a few women, who had either been

been ſeduced by their paſſions, or had fallen victims to the licentious manners of their age, ſhould be found amongſt thoſe, who were moſt ready to receive a religion, that forbad all impurity? I do not apprehend, that this circumſtance ought to bring an inſinuation of diſcredit either upon the ſex, or upon thoſe who wrought their reformation.

That the majority of the firſt converts to Chriſtianity, were of an inferior condition in life, may readily be allowed; and you yourſelf have in another place given a good reaſon for it; thoſe who are diſtinguiſhed by riches, honours, or knowledge, being ſo very inconſiderable in number, when compared with the bulk of mankind: But though not many mighty, not many noble, were called; yet ſome mighty, and ſome noble, ſome of as great reputation as any of the age in which they lived, were attached to the Chriſtian faith. Short indeed are the accounts, which have been tranſmitted to us, of the firſt propagating of Chriſtianity; yet even in theſe, we meet with the names of many, who would have done credit to any cauſe. I will not pretend to enumerate them all; a few of them will be ſufficient to make you recollect,

that

that there were, at leaſt, ſome converts to Chriſtianity, both from among the Jews and the Gentiles, whoſe lives were not ſtained with inexpiable crimes. Amongſt theſe, we reckon Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; Joſeph of Arimathea, a man of fortune and a counſellor; a nobleman and a centurion of Capernaum; Jairus, Criſpus, Soſthenes, rulers of ſynagogues; Apollos, an eloquent and learned man; Zenas, a Jewiſh lawyer, the treaſurer of Candace, queen of Æthiopia; Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian band; Dionyſius, a member of the Areopagus at Athens, and Sergius Paulus, a man of proconſular or prætorian authority, of whom it may be remarked, that if he reſigned his high and lucrative office in conſequence of his turning Chriſtian, it is a ſtrong preſumption in its favour; if he retained it, we may conclude, that the profeſſion of Chriſtianity was not ſo utterly incompatible with the diſcharge of the offices of civil life, as you ſometimes repreſent it. This catalogue of men of rank, fortune and knowledge, who embraced Chriſtianity, might, was it neceſſary, be much enlarged; and probably another converſation with St. Paul would have enabled us to grace it with the names of Feſ-

tus,

tus, and king Agrippa himſelf; not that the writers of the Books of the New Teſtament ſeem to have been at all ſolicitous, in mentioning the great or the learned, who were converted to the faith; had that been part of their deſign, they would, in the true ſtile of impoſtors, have kept out of ſight the publicans and ſinners, the tanners and the tent-makers with whom they converſed and dwelt; and introduced to our notice none but thoſe, who had been *brought up with Herod, or the chief men of Aſia*—whom they had the honour to number amongſt their friends.

That the primitive Chriſtians took great care to have an unſullied reputation, by abſtaining from the commiſſion of whatever might tend to pollute it, is eaſily admitted; but we do not ſo eaſily grant, that this care is a "a circumſtance, which uſually attends ſmall aſſemblies of men, when they ſeparate themſelves from the body of a nation, or the religion to which they belong." It did not attend the Nicolaitanes, the Simonians, the Menandrians, and the Carpocratians, in the firſt ages of the church, of which you are ſpeaking; and it cannot be unknown to you, Sir, that the ſcandalous vices of

theſe

theſe very early Sectaries, brought a general and undiſtinguiſhed cenſure upon the Chriſtian name; and ſo far from promoting the increaſe of the church, excited in the minds of the Pagans an abhorrence of whatever reſpected it; it cannot be unknown to you, Sir, that ſeveral Sectaries both at home and abroad might be mentioned, who have departed from the religion to which they belonged; and which, unhappily for themſelves and the community, have taken as little care to preſerve their reputation unſpotted, as thoſe of the firſt and ſecond centuries. If then the firſt Chriſtians did take the care you mention (and I am wholly of your opinion in that point) their ſolicitude might as candidly, perhaps, and as reaſonably be derived from a ſenſe of their duty, and an honeſt endeavour to diſcharge it, as from the mere deſire of increaſing the honour of their confraternity by the illuſtrious integrity of its members.

You are eloquent in deſcribing the auſtere morality of the primitive Chriſtians, as adverſe to the propenſities of ſenſe, and abhorrent from all the innocent pleaſures and amuſements of life; and you enlarge, with a ſtudied minuteneſs, upon their cenſures of luxury, and their

ſentiments

ſentiments concerning marriage and chaſtity;—but in this circumſtantial enumeration of their errors or their faults (which I am under no neceſſity of denying or excuſing) you ſeem to forget the very purpoſe, for which you profeſs to have introduced the mention of them; for the picture you have drawn is ſo hideous, and the colouring ſo diſmal, that inſtead of alluring to a cloſer inſpection, it muſt have made every man of pleaſure or of ſenſe turn from it with horror or diſguſt; and ſo far from contributing to the rapid growth of Chriſtianity by the auſterity of their manners, it muſt be a wonder to any one, how the firſt Chriſtians ever made a ſingle convert.—It was firſt objected by Celſus, that Chriſtianity was a mean religion, inculcating ſuch a puſillanimity and patience under affronts, ſuch a contempt of riches and worldly honours, as muſt weaken the nerves of civil government, and expoſe a ſociety of Chriſtians to the prey of the firſt invaders. This objection has been repeated by Bayle; and though fully anſwered by Bernard and others, it is ſtill the favourite theme of every Eſprit fort of our own age: Even you, Sir, think the averſion of Chriſtians to the buſineſs of war and government,

ment, "a criminal diſregard to the public welfare." To all that has been ſaid upon this ſubject, it may with juſtice, I think, be anſwered, that Chriſtianity troubles not itſelf with ordering the conſtitutions of civil ſocieties; but levels the weight of all its influence at the hearts of the individuals which compoſe them; and, as Origen ſaid to Celſus, was every individual in every nation a goſpel Chriſtian, there would be neither internal injuſtice, nor external war; there would be none of thoſe paſſions, which imbitter the intercourſes of civil life, and deſolate the globe. What reproach then can it be to a religion, that it inculcates doctrines, which, if univerſally practiſed, would introduce univerſal tranquility and the moſt exalted happineſs amongſt mankind?

It muſt proceed from a total miſapprehenſion of the deſign of the Chriſtian diſpenſation, or from a very ignorant interpretation of the particular injunctions, forbidding us to make riches or honours a primary purſuit, or the prompt gratification of revenge a firſt principle of action, to infer,—that an individual Chriſtian is obliged by his religion to offer his throat to an aſſaſſin, and his property to the firſt plun-

derer; or that a ſociety of Chriſtians may not repel, in the beſt manner they are able, the unjuſt aſſaults of hoſtile invaſion.

I KNOW of no precepts in the goſpel, which debar a man from the poſſeſſion of domeſtic comforts, or deaden the activity of his private friendſhips, or prohibit the exertion of his utmoſt ability in the ſervice of the public; the —*niſi quietum nihil beatum*—is no part of the Chriſtian's Creed; his virtue, is an active virtue; and we juſtly refer to the ſchool of Epicurus, the doctrines concerning abſtinence from marriage, from the cultivation of friendſhip, from the management of public affairs, as ſuited to that ſelfiſh indolence, which was the favourite tenet of his philoſophy.

I am, &c.

LETTER

LETTER FIFTH.

SIR,

"THE union and the diſcipline of the Chriſtian church," or, as you are pleaſed to ſtile it, of the Chriſtian republic, is the laſt of the five ſecondary cauſes, to which you have referred the rapid and extenſive ſpread of Chriſtianity. It muſt be acknowledged that union eſſentially contributes to the ſtrength of every aſſociation, civil, military, and religious; but unfortunately for your argument, and much to the reproach of Chriſtians, nothing has been more wanting amongſt them, from the apoſtolic age to our own, than union. *I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Chriſt*, are expreſſions of diſunion, which we meet with in the earlieſt period of church hiſtory; and we cannot look into the writings of any, either

friend or foe to Chriſtianity, but we find the one of them lamenting, and the other exulting in an immenſe catalogue of ſectaries; and both of them thereby furniſhing us with great reaſon to believe, that the diviſions with reſpect to doctrine, worſhip, and diſcipline, which have ever ſubſiſted in the church, muſt have greatly tended to hurt the credit of Chriſtianity, and to alienate the minds of the Gentiles from the reception of ſuch a various and diſcordant faith.

I READILY grant, that there was a certain community of doctrine, an intercourſe of hoſpitality, and a confederacy of diſcipline, eſtabliſhed amongſt the individuals of every church; ſo that none could be admitted into any aſſembly of Chriſtians, without undergoing a previous examination into his manner of life* (which ſhews, by the bye, that every reprobate could not, as the fit ſeized him, or his intereſt induced him, become a Chriſtian) and without proteſting in the moſt ſolemn manner, that he would neither be guilty of murder, nor adultery, nor theft, nor perfidy; and it may be granted alſo, that

* Nonnulli præpoſiti ſunt, qui in vitam et mores eorum, qui admittuntur, inquirant, ut non conceſſa facientes candidatos religionis arceant a ſuis conventibus. Orig. Con. Cel. Lib. 2.

that thoſe who broke this compact, were ejected by common conſent from the confraternity into which they had been admitted; it may be further granted, that this confederacy extended itſelf to independent churches; and that thoſe who had, for their immoralities, been excluded from Chriſtian community in any one church, were rarely, if ever, admitted to it by another; juſt as a member, who has been expelled any one College in an Univerſity, is generally thought unworthy of being admitted by any other: But it is not admitted, that this ſeverity and this union of diſcipline could ever have induced the Pagans to forſake the gods of their country, and to expoſe themſelves to the contemptuous hatred of their neighbours, and to all the ſeverities of perſecution exerciſed, with unrelenting barbarity, againſt the Chriſtians.

THE account you give of the origin and progreſs of the epiſcopal juriſdiction, of the preeminence of the metropolitan churches, and of the ambition of the Roman Pontiff, I believe to be in general accurate and true; and I am not in the leaſt ſurprized at the bitterneſs, which now and then eſcapes you in treating this ſubject; for, to ſee the moſt benign religion that imagination can

form, becoming an inſtrument of oppreſſion; and the moſt humble one adminiſtering to the pride, the avarice, and the ambition of thoſe, who wiſh to be conſidered as its guardians, and who avowed themſelves its profeſſors, would extort a cenſure from men more attached probably to church authority than yourſelf: Not that I think it either a very candid or a very uſeful undertaking, to be ſolely and induſtriouſly engaged in portraying the characters of the profeſſors of Chriſtianity in the worſt colours; it is not candid, becauſe "the great law of impartiality, which obliges an hiſtorian to reveal the imperfections of the uninſpired teachers and believers of the goſpel," obliges him alſo not to conceal, or to paſs over with niggard and reluctant mention, the illuſtrious virtues of thoſe, who gave up fortune and fame, all their comforts, and all their hopes in this life, nay, life itſelf, rather than violate any one of the precepts of that goſpel, which, from the teſtimony of inſpired teachers, they conceived they had good reaſon to believe; it is not uſeful, becauſe "to a careleſs obſerver, (that is, to the generality of mankind) "*their* faults may ſeem to caſt a ſhade on the faith, which they profeſſed;" and may really infect the

the minds of the young and unlearned eſpecially, with prejudices againſt a religion, upon their rational reception or rejection of which, a matter of the utmoſt importance may (believe me, Sir, it may, for aught you or any perſon elſe can prove to the contrary) entirely depend. It is an eaſy matter to amuſe ourſelves and others with the immoralities of prieſts, and the ambition of prelates, with the abſurd virulence of ſynods and councils, with the ridiculous doctrines, which viſionary enthuſiaſts or intereſted churchmen have ſanctified with the name of Chriſtian; but a diſplay of ingenuity or erudition upon ſuch ſubjects is much miſplaced; ſince it excites almoſt in every perſon, an unavoidable ſuſpicion of the purity of the ſource itſelf, from which ſuch polluted ſtreams have been derived. Do not miſtake my meaning; I am far from wiſhing, that the clergy ſhould be looked up to with a blind reverence, or their imperfections ſcreened by the ſanctity of their function, from the animadverſion of the world: Quite the contrary; their conduct, I am of opinion, ought to be more nicely ſcrutinized, and their deviation from the rectitude of the goſpel more ſeverely cenſured, than that of other men; but

great care ſhould be taken not to repreſent *their* vices, or *their* indiſcretions, as originating in the principles of their religion. Do not miſtake me; I am not here begging quarter for Chriſtianity; or contending, that even the principles of our religion ſhould be received with implicit faith; or that every objection to Chriſtianity ſhould be ſtifled, by a repreſentation of the miſchief it might do, if publicly promulged; on the contrary, we invite, nay, we challenge you to a direct and liberal attack; though oblique glances, and diſingenuous inſinuations, we are willing to avoid; well knowing, that the character of our religion, like that of an honeſt man, is defended with greater difficulty againſt the ſuggeſtions of ridicule, and the ſecret malignity of pretended friends, than againſt poſitive accuſations, and the avowed malice of open enemies.

In your account of the primitive church, you ſet forth, that "the want of diſcipline and human learning, was ſupplied by the occaſional aſſiſtance of the prophets; who were called to that function, without diſtinction of age, of ſex, or of natural abilities."—That the gift of prophecy was one of the ſpiritual gifts, by which ſome of the firſt Chriſtians were enabled to co-

operate

operate with the Apoſtles, in the general deſign of preaching the Goſpel; and that this gift, or rather, as Mr. Locke thinks, the gift of tongues, (by the oſtentation of which, many of them were prompted to ſpeak in their aſſemblies at the ſame time) was the occaſion of ſome diſorder in the church of Corinth, which required the interpoſition of the Apoſtle to compoſe, is confeſſed on all hands. But if you mean, that the prophets were ever the ſole paſtors of the faithful; or that no proviſion was made by the Apoſtles for the good government and edification of the church, except what might be accidentally derived from the occaſional aſſiſtance of the prophets, you are much miſtaken; and have undoubtedly forgot, what is ſaid of Paul and Barnabas having ordained elders in Lyſtra, Iconium, and Antioch; and of Paul's commiſſion to Titus, whom he had left in Crete, to ordain elders in every city; and of his inſtructions both to him and Timothy, concerning the qualifications of thoſe, whom they were to appoint biſhops: One of which was, that a biſhop ſhould be able, by ſound doctrine, to exhort and to convince the gain-ſayer; nor is it ſaid, that this ſound doctrine was to be communicated

municated to the biſhop by prophecy, or that all perſons, without diſtinction, might be called to that office; but a biſhop was *to be able to teach*, not what he had learned by prophecy, but what Paul had publicly preached; *the things that thou haſt heard of me among many witneſſes, the ſame commit thou to faithful men, who ſhall be able to teach others alſo.* And in every place almoſt, where prophets are mentioned, they are joined with Apoſtles and teachers, and other miniſters of the goſpel; ſo that there is no reaſon for your repreſenting them as a diſtinct order of men, who were by their occaſional aſſiſtance to ſupply the want of diſcipline and human learning in the church. It would be taking too large a field, to enquire whether the prophets, you ſpeak of, were endowed with ordinary or extraordinary gifts; whether they always ſpoke by the immediate impulſe of the Spirit, or according to *the analogy of faith*; whether their gift conſiſted in the foretelling of future events, or in the interpreting of ſcripture, to the edification and exhortation and comfort of the church, or in both: I will content myſelf with obſerving, that he will judge very improperly concerning the prophets of the apoſtolic church, who

who takes his idea of their office or importance from your deſcription of them.

In ſpeaking of the community of goods, which, you ſay, was adopted for a ſhort time in the primitive church, you hold as inconcluſive the arguments of Moſheim; who has endeavoured to prove, that it was a community quite different from that recommended by Pythagoras or Plato; conſiſting principally in a common uſe, derived from an unbounded liberality, which induced the opulent to ſhare their riches with their indigent brethren; there have been others, as well as Moſheim, who have entertained this opinion; and it is not quite ſo indefenſible, as you repreſent it; but whether it be reaſonable or abſurd, need not now be examined: It is far more neceſſary to take notice of an expreſſion which you have uſed, and which may be apt to miſlead unwary readers into a very injurious ſuſpicion, concerning the integrity of the Apoſtles. In proceſs of time you obſerve, "the converts, who embraced the new religion, were permitted to retain the poſſeſſion of their patrimony."—This expreſſion, *permitted to retain*, in ordinary acceptation, implies an antecedent obligation to part with: Now,

Now, Sir, I have not the ſhadow of a doubt in affirming, that we have no account in ſcripture of any ſuch obligation being impoſed upon the converts to Chriſtianity, either by Chriſt himſelf, or by his Apoſtles, or by any other authority: Nay, in the very place where this community of goods is treated of, there is an expreſs proof (I know not how your impartiality has happened to overlook it) to the contrary. When Peter was about to inflict an exemplary puniſhment upon Ananias (not for keeping back a part of the price, as ſome men are fond of repreſenting it, but) for his lying and hypocriſy, in offering a part of the price of his land, as the whole of it; he ſaid to him, *whilſt it remained* (unſold) *was it not thine own? and after it was ſold, was it not in thine own power?* From this account it is evident, that Ananias was under no obligation to part with his patrimony; and after he had parted with it, the price was in his own power; the Apoſtle would have *permitted him to retain* the whole of it, if he had thought fit; though he would not permit his prevarication to go unpuniſhed.

You have remarked, that "the feaſts of love, the agapæ, as they were called, conſtituted a very

very pleaſing and eſſential part of public worſhip."—Leſt any one ſhould from hence be led to ſuſpect, that theſe feaſts of love, this pleaſing part of the public worſhip of the primitive church, reſembled the unhallowed meetings of ſome impure ſectaries of our own times, I will take the liberty to add to your account, a ſhort explication of the nature of theſe agapæ. Tertullian, in the 39th chapter of his Apology, has done it to my hands. "The nature of our ſupper, ſays he, is indicated by its name; it is called by a word, which, in the Greek language, ſignifies love. We are not anxious about the expence of the entertainment; ſince we look upon that as gain, which is expended with a pious purpoſe, in the relief and refreſhment of all our indigent.—The occaſion of our entertainment being ſo honourable, you may judge of the manner of its being conducted; it conſiſts in the diſcharge of religious duties; it admits nothing vile, nothing immodeſt. Before we ſit down, prayer is made to God. The hungry eat as much as they deſire, and every one drinks as much as can be uſeful to ſober men. We ſo feaſt, as men, who have their minds impreſſed with the idea of ſpending the night in

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the worſhip of God; we ſo converſe, as men, who are conſcious that the Lord heareth them," &c. Perhaps you may object to this teſtimony, in favour of the innocence of Chriſtian meetings, as liable to partiality, becauſe it is the teſtimony of a Chriſtian; and you may, perhaps, be able to pick out from the writings of this Chriſtian, ſomething that looks like a contradiction of this account: However, I will reſt the matter upon this teſtimony for the preſent; forbearing to quote any other Chriſtian writer upon the ſubject, as I ſhall, in a future letter, produce you a teſtimony ſuperior to every objection. You ſpeak too of the agapæ, as an eſſential part of the public worſhip; this is not according to your uſual accuracy; for, had they been eſſential, the edict of an heathen magiſtrate would not have been able to put a ſtop to them; yet Pliny, in his letter to Trajan, expreſsly ſays, that the Chriſtians left them off, upon his publiſhing an edict prohibiting aſſemblies; and we know, that in the council of Carthage, in the fourth century, on account of the abuſes which attended them, they began to be interdicted, and ceaſed almoſt univerſally in the fifth.

I HAVE

I HAVE but two obſervations to make upon what you have advanced, concerning the ſeverity of eccleſiaſtical penance; the firſt is, that even you yourſelf do not deduce its inſtitution from the ſcripture; but from the power, which every voluntary ſociety has over its own members; and therefore, however extravagant, or however abſurd; however oppoſite to the attributes of a commiſerating God, or the feelings of a fallible man, it may be thought; or upon whatever trivial occaſion, ſuch as that you mention, of calumniating a Biſhop, a Preſbyter, or even a Deacon, it may have been inflicted; Chriſt and his Apoſtles are not anſwerable for it. The other is, that it was, of all poſſible expedients, the leaſt fitted to accompliſh the end for which you think it was introduced, the propagation of Chriſtianity. The ſight of a penitent humbled by a public confeſſion, emaciated by faſting, clothed in ſackcloth, proſtrated at the door of the aſſembly, and imploring for years together the pardon of his offences, and a readmiſſion into the boſom of the church, was a much more likely means of deterring the Pagans from Chriſtian community, than the pious liberality you mention, was of allu-

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ring them into it. This pious liberality, Sir, would exhauſt even your elegant powers of deſcription, before you could exhibit it in the amiable manner it deſerves; it is derived from the *new commandment of loving one another*; and it has ever been the diſtinguiſhing characteriſtic of Chriſtians, as oppoſed to every other denomination of men, Jews, Mahometans, or Pagans. In the times of the Apoſtles, and in the firſt ages of the church, it ſhewed itſelf in voluntary contributions for the relief of the poor and the perſecuted, the infirm and the unfortunate; as ſoon as the church was permitted to have permanent poſſeſſions in land, and acquired the protection of the civil power, it exerted itſelf in the erection of hoſpitals of every kind; inſtitutions theſe, of charity and humanity, which were forgotten in the laws of Solon and Lycurgus; and for even one example of which, you will, I believe, in vain explore the boaſted annals of Pagan Rome. Indeed, Sir, you will think too injuriouſly of this liberality, if you look upon its origin as ſuperſtitious; or upon its application as an artifice of the prieſthood, to ſeduce the indigent into the boſom of the church; it was the pure and uncorrupted fruit of genuine Chriſtianity.

You

You are much *ſurprized*, and not a little *concerned*, that Tacitus, and the younger Pliny, have ſpoken ſo ſlightly of the Chriſtian ſyſtem; and that Seneca, and the elder Pliny, have not vouchſafed to mention it at all.—This difficulty ſeems to have ſtruck others as well as yourſelf; and I might refer you to the concluſion of the ſecond volume of Dr. Lardner's Collection of ancient Jewiſh and Heathen Teſtimonies to the Truth of the Chriſtian Religion, for full ſatisfaction in this point; but perhaps an obſervation or two may be ſufficient to diminiſh your ſurprize.

Obscure ſectaries, of upright morals, when they ſeparate themſelves from the religion of their country, do not ſpeedily acquire the attention of men of letters. The hiſtorians are apprehenſive of depreciating the dignity of their learned labour, and contaminating their ſplendid narration of illuſtrious events, by mixing with it a diſguſting detail of religious combinations; and the philoſophers are uſually too deeply engaged in abſtract ſcience, or in exploring the infinite intricacy of natural appearances, to buſy themſelves with what they, perhaps haſtily, eſteem popu-

lar ſuperſtitions. Hiſtorians and philoſophers, of no mean reputation, might be mentioned, I believe, who were the contemporaries of Luther and the firſt reformers; and who have paſſed over, in negligent or contemptuous ſilence, their daring and unpopular attempts to ſhake the ſtability of St. Peter's Chair. Oppoſition to the religion of a people muſt become general, before it can deſerve the notice of the civil magiſtrate; and till it does that, it will moſtly be thought below the animadverſion of diſtinguiſhed writers. This remark is peculiarly applicable to the caſe in point. The firſt Chriſtians, as Chriſt had foretold, were *hated of all men for his name's ſake:* It was the name itſelf, not any vices adhering to the name, which Pliny puniſhed; and they were every where held in exceeding contempt, till their numbers excited the apprehenſion of the ruling powers. The philoſophers conſidered them as enthuſiaſts, and neglected them; the prieſts oppoſed them as innovators, and calumniated them; the great overlooked them, the learned deſpiſed them, and the curious alone, who examined into the foundation of their faith, believed them.

But

But the negligence of ſome half dozen of writers, (moſt of them however bear incidental teſtimony to the truth of ſeveral facts reſpecting Chriſtianity) in not relating circumſtantially the origin, the progreſs, and the pretenſions of a new ſect, is a very inſufficient reaſon for queſtioning either the evidence of the principles upon which it was built, or the ſupernatural power by which it was ſupported.

The Roman hiſtorians, moreover, were not only culpably incurious concerning the Chriſtians; but unpardonably ignorant of what concerned either them, or the Jews: I ſay, unpardonably ignorant, becauſe the means of information were within their reach; the writings of Moſes were every where to be had in Greek; and the works of Joſephus were publiſhed, before Tacitus wrote his hiſtory; and yet even Tacitus has fallen into great abſurdity, and ſelf-contradiction, in his account of the Jews; and though Tertullian's zeal carried him much too far, when he called him *Mendaciorum loquaciſſimus*, yet one cannot help regretting the little pains he took to acquire proper information upon that ſubject. He derives the name of the Jews by a forced

interpolation from Mount Ida, in Crete *; and he repreſents them as abhorring all kinds of images in public worſhip, and yet accuſes them of having placed the image of an aſs in the holy of holies; and preſently after he tells us, that Pompey, when he prophaned the temple, found the ſanctuary entirely empty. Similar inaccuracies might be noticed in Plutarch and other writers, who have ſpoken of the Jews; and you yourſelf have referred to an obſcure paſſage in Suetonius, as offering a proof how ſtrangely the Jews and Chriſtians of Rome were confounded with each other. Why then ſhould we think it remarkable, that a few celebrated writers, who looked upon the Chriſtians as an obſcure ſect of the Jews, and upon the Jews as a barbarous and deteſted people, whoſe hiſtory was not worth the peruſal; and who were moreover engaged in the relation of the great events, which either occaſioned or accompanied the ruin of their eternal empire; why ſhould we be ſurprized, that men occupied in ſuch intereſting ſubjects,

* Inclytum in Creta Idam montem, accolas Idæos auctо in barbarum cognomento Judæos vocitari. Tac. Hiſt. L. 5, ſub. Init.

jects, and influenced by such inveterate prejudices, should have left us but short and imperfect descriptions of the Christian system?

"But how shall we excuse, you say, the supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophic world, to those evidences, which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses?"—"The laws of nature were perpetually suspended for the benefit of the church: But the sages of Greece and Rome turned aside from the awful spectacle."—To their shame be it spoken, that they did so—"and pursuing the ordinary occupations of life and study, appeared unconscious of any alterations in the moral or physical government of the world."—To this objection, I answer, in the first place, that we have no reason to believe, that miracles were performed, as often as philosophers deigned to give their attention to them; or that, at the period of time you allude to, the laws of nature were *perpetually* suspended, for the benefit of the church. It may be, that not one of the few heathen writers, whose books have escaped the ravages of time, was ever present, when a miracle was wrought; but will it follow, because Pliny, or Plutarch,

or Galen, or Seneca, or Suetonius, or Tacitus, had never ſeen a miracle, that no miracles were ever performed? They indeed were learned and obſervant men; and it may be a matter of ſurprize to us, that miracles ſo celebrated, as the friends of Chriſtianity ſuppoſe the Chriſtian ones to have been, ſhould never have been mentioned by them, though they had not ſeen them; and had an Adrian or a Veſpaſian been the authors of but a thouſandth part of the miracles you have aſcribed to the primitive church, more than one probably of theſe very hiſtorians, philoſophers as they were, would have adorned his hiſtory with a narration of them: For though they turned aſide from the awful ſpectacle of the miracles of a poor deſpiſed Apoſtle—yet they beheld with exulting complacency, and have related with unſuſpecting credulity, the oſtentatious tricks of a Roman Emperor. It was not for want of faith in miraculous events, that theſe ſages neglected the Chriſtian miracles, but for want of candour, and impartial examination.

I ANSWER, in the ſecond place, that in the Acts of the Apoſtles, we have an account of

of a great multitude of Pagans of every condition of life, who were ſo far from being inattentive to the evidences, which were preſented by the hand of Omnipotence to their ſenſes, that they contemplated them with reverence and wonder; and forſaking the religion of their anceſtors, and all the flattering hopes of worldly profit, reputation, and tranquility, adhered with aſtoniſhing reſolution to the profeſſion of Chriſtianity. From the concluſion of the Acts, till the time in which ſome of the ſages you mention flouriſhed, is a very obſcure part of church hiſtory; yet we are certain, that many of the Pagan, and we have ſome reaſon to believe, that not a few of the philoſophic world, during that period, did not turn aſide from the awful ſpectacle of miracles, but ſaw and believed; and that a few others ſhould be found, who probably had never ſeen, and therefore would not believe, is ſurely no very extraordinary circumſtance. Why ſhould we not anſwer to objections, ſuch as theſe, with the boldneſs of St. Jerome; and bid Celſus, and Porphyry, and Julian, and their followers, learn the illuſtrious characters of the men, who founded, built up, and adorned the

Chriſtian church?* Why ſhould we not tell them, with Arnobius, of the orators, the grammarians, the rhetoricians, the lawyers, the phyſicians, the philoſophers, "who appeared conſcious of the alterations in the moral and phyſical government of the world;" and from that conſciouſneſs, forſook the ordinary occupations of life and ſtudy, and attached themſelves to the Chriſtian diſcipline? †

I ANSWER, in the laſt place, that the miracles of Chriſtians were falſely attributed to magic; and were for that reaſon thought unworthy the notice of the writers you have referred to. Suetonius, in his life of Nero, calls the Chriſtians men of a new and magical ſuperſtition: ‡ I am ſenſible, that you laugh at thoſe "ſagacious commentators," who tranſlate the original word by magical; and adopting the idea of Moſheim, you think it ought to be rendered

* Diſcant Celſus, Porphyrius, Julianus, rabidi adverſus Chriſtum canes, diſcant eorum ſectatores, qui putant Eccleſiam nullos Philoſophos et eloquentes, nullos habuiſſe Doctores; quanti et quales viri eam fundaverint, extruxerint, ornaverintque; et deſinant fidem noſtram ruſticæ tantum ſimplicitatis arguere, ſuamque potius imperitiam agnoſcant. Jero. Præ. Lib. de Illuſ. Eccl. Scrip.

† Arnob. Con. Gen. L. 11.

‡ Genus hominum, ſuperſtitionis novæ et *maleficæ*. Suet. in Nero. c. 16.

dered miſchievous or pernicious: Unqueſtionably it frequently has that meaning; with due deference, however, to Moſheim and yourſelf, I cannot help being of opinion, that in this place, as deſcriptive of the Chriſtian religion, it is rightly tranſlated magical. The Theodocian Code muſt be my excuſe, for diſſenting from ſuch reſpectable authority; and in it, I conjecture, you will find good reaſon for being of my opinion.* Nor ought any friend to Chriſtianity to be aſtoniſhed or alarmed at Suetonius applying the word magical to the Chriſtian religion; for the miracles wrought by Chriſt and his Apoſtles, principally conſiſted in alleviating the diſtreſſes, by curing the obſtinate diſeaſes of human kind; and the proper meaning of magic, as underſtood by the ancients, is a higher and more holy branch of the art of healing. † The elder Pliny loſt his life in an eruption of Veſuvius,

* Chaldæi ac *Magi*, et cæteri quos vulgus *maleficos* ob facinorum magnitudinem appellat.——Si quis *magus* vel magicis contaminibus adſuetus, qui *maleficus* vulgi conſuetudine nuncupatur. IX Cod. Theodo. Tit. XVI.

† Pliny, ſpeaking of the origin of magic, ſays, Natam primum e medicina nemo dubitat, ac ſpecie ſalutari irrepſiſſe velut *altiorem ſanctioremque medicinam*.—He afterwards ſays, that it was mixed with mathematical arts; and thus *magici* and *mathematici* are joined by Pliny, as *malefici* and *magici* are in the Theodocian Code. Plin. Nat. Hiſt. Lib. 30, c. 1.

Veſuvius, about forty-ſeven years after the death of Chriſt; ſome fifteen years before the death of Pliny, the Chriſtians were perſecuted at Rome for a crime, of which every perſon knew them innocent; but from the deſcription which Tacitus gives, of the low eſtimation they were held in at that time (for which, however, he aſſigns no cauſe; and therefore we may reaſonably conjecture it was the ſame, for which the Jews were every where become ſo odious, an oppoſition to polytheiſm) and of the extreme ſufferings they underwent, we cannot be much ſurprized, that their name is not to be found in the works of Pliny, or of Seneca; the ſect itſelf muſt, by Nero's perſecution, have been almoſt deſtroyed in Rome; and it would have been uncourtly, not to ſay unſafe, to have noticed an order of men, whoſe innocence an Emperor had determined to traduce, in order to divert the dangerous, but deſerved ſtream of popular cenſure from himſelf. Notwithſtanding this, there is a paſſage in the Natural Hiſtory of Pliny, which, how much ſoever it may have been overlooked, contains, I think, a very ſtrong alluſion to the Chriſtians; and clearly intimates, he had heard of their miracles. In ſpeaking concern-

ing

ing the origin of magic, he ſays,—there is alſo another faction of magic, derived from the Jews, Moſes, and Lotopea, and ſubſiſting at preſent.*—The word faction, does not ill denote the opinion the Romans entertained of the religious aſſociations of the Chriſtians;† and a magical faction implies their pretenſions, at leaſt, to the miraculous gifts of healing; and its deſcending from Moſes, is according to the cuſtom of the Romans, by which they confounded the Chriſtians with the Jews; and its being then ſubſiſting, ſeems to have a ſtrong reference to the rumours Pliny had negligently heard reported of the Chriſtians.

SUBMITTING each of theſe anſwers to your cool and candid conſideration; I proceed to take notice of another difficulty in your fifteenth chapter, which ſome have thought one of the moſt important in your whole book—the ſilence of profane hiſtorians, concerning the

* Eſt et alia magices *factio*, a Moſe *etiamnum* et Lotopea Judæis pendens. Plin. Nat. Hiſt. Lib. 30, c. 2. Edit. Hardu. Dr. Lardner and others have made ſlight mention of this paſſage, probably from their reading in bad editions *Jamne* for *etiamnum*, a Moſe et Jamne et Jotape Judæis pendens.

† Tertullian reckons the ſect of the Chriſtians, inter licitas *factiones*. Ap. c. 38.

the preternatural darkneſs at the crucifixion of Chriſt.—You know, Sir, that ſeveral learned men are of opinion, that profane hiſtory is not ſilent upon this ſubject; I will, however, put their authority for the preſent quite out of the queſtion. I will neither trouble you with the teſtimony of Phlegon, nor with the appeal of Tertullian to the public regiſters of the Romans; but meeting you upon your own ground, and granting you every thing you deſire, I will endeavour, from a fair and candid examination of the hiſtory of this event, to ſuggeſt a doubt, at leaſt, to your mind, whether this was "the greateſt phænomenon, to which the mortal eye has been witneſs, ſince the creation of the globe."

THIS darkneſs is mentioned by three of the four Evangeliſts; St. Matthew thus expreſſes himſelf,—*now from the ſixth hour there was darkneſs over all the land until the ninth hour*; St. Mark ſays,—*and when the ſixth hour was come, there was darkneſs over the whole land until the ninth hour*; St. Luke,—*and it was about the ſixth hour, and there was darkneſs over all the earth until the ninth hour; and the ſun was darkened.* The three Evangeliſts agree, that there was darkneſs;

darkneſs;—and they agree in the extent of the darkneſs: For it is the ſame expreſſion in the original, which our tranſlators have rendered *earth* in Luke, and *land* in the two other accounts; and they agree in the duration of the darkneſs; it laſted three hours:—Luke adds a particular circumſtance, *that the ſun was darkened.* I do not know, whether this event be any where elſe mentioned in ſcripture, ſo that our enquiry can neither be extenſive nor difficult.

In philoſophical propriety of ſpeech, darkneſs conſiſts in the total abſence of light, and admits of no degrees; however, in the more common acceptation of the word, there are degrees of darkneſs, as well as of light; and as the Evangeliſts have ſaid nothing, by which the particular degree of darkneſs can be determined, we have as much reaſon to ſuppoſe it was ſlight, as you have that it was exceſſive; but if it was ſlight, though it had extended itſelf over the ſurface of the whole globe, the difficulty of its not being recorded by Pliny or Seneca vaniſhes at once.* Do you not perceive, Sir, upon what

* The Author of L'Evangile de la Raiſon is miſtaken in ſaying, that the Evangeliſts ſpeak of a *thick darkneſs*; and that

what a ſlender foundation this mighty objection is grounded; when we have only to put you upon proving, that the darkneſs at the crucifixion was of ſo unuſual a nature, as to have excited the particular attention of all mankind, or even of thoſe who were witneſſes to it? But I do not mean to deal ſo logically with you; rather give me leave to ſpare you the trouble of your proof, by proving, or ſhewing the probability at leaſt, of the direct contrary. There is a circumſtance mentioned by St. John, which ſeems to indicate, that the darkneſs was not ſo exceſſive as is generally ſuppoſed; for it is probable, that during the continuance of the darkneſs, Jeſus ſpoke both to his mother, and to his beloved diſciple, whom he *ſaw* from the croſs; they were near the croſs; but the ſoldiers which ſurrounded it, muſt have kept them at too great a diſtance, for Jeſus to have *ſeen* them and *known* them, had the darkneſs at the crucifixion been exceſſive, like the preter-

natural

that miſtake has led him into another, into a diſbelief of the event, becauſe it has not been mentioned by the writers of the times—ſes hiſtoriens (the Evangeliſts) ont le front de nous dire, qu' a ſa mort la terre a eté couverte d' epaiſſes tenebres en plein midi et en pleine lune; comme ſi tous les ecrivains de ce tems-la n' auroient pas remarqué un ſi etrange miracle! L'Evan. de la Raiſ. p. 99.

natural darkneſs which God brought upon the land of Egypt; for it is expreſsly ſaid, that during the continuance of that darkneſs, *they ſaw not one another.* The expreſſion in St. Luke, *the ſun was darkened,* tends rather to confirm, than to overthrow this reaſoning. I am ſenſible, this expreſſion is generally thought equivalent to another—the ſun was eclipſed;—but the Bible is open to us all; and there can be no preſumption, in endeavouring to inveſtigate the meaning of ſcripture for ourſelves. Luckily for the preſent argumentation, the very phraſe of the ſun's being darkened occurs, in ſo many words, in one other place, (and in only one) of the New Teſtament; and from that place, you may poſſibly ſee reaſon to imagine, that the darkneſs might not, perhaps, have been ſo intenſe, as to deſerve the particular notice of the Roman naturaliſts:—*And he opened the bottomleſs pit, and there aroſe a ſmoke out of the pit, as the ſmoke of a great furnace, and the ſun was darkened,* and the air, by reaſon of the ſmoke of the pit.* If we ſhould ſay, that the ſun at the crucifixion was obnubilated, and

* ——και ἐσκοτισθη ὁ ἡλιος. Apoc. 9. 2.

and darkened by the intervention of clouds, as it is here repreſented to be by the intervention of a ſmoke, like the ſmoke of a furnace, I do not ſee what you could object to our account; but ſuch a phænomenon has ſurely no right to be eſteemed the greateſt that mortal eye has ever beheld. I may be miſtaken in this interpretation; but I have no deſign to miſrepreſent the fact, in order to get rid of a difficulty; the darkneſs may have been as intenſe as many commentators have ſuppoſed it; but neither they nor you can prove it was ſo; and I am ſurely under no neceſſity, upon this occaſion, of granting you, out of deference to any commentator, what you can neither prove nor render probable.

But you ſtill, perhaps, may think, that the darkneſs, by its extent, made up for this deficiency in point of intenſeneſs. The original word, expreſſive of its extent, is ſometimes interpreted by the whole earth; more frequently in the New Teſtament, of any little portion of the earth; for we read of the land of Judah, of the land of Iſrael, of the land of Zabulon, and of the land Nephthalim; and it may very properly, I conceive, be tranſlated in the place in queſtion by *Region*,

gion. But why ſhould all the world take notice of a darkneſs, which extended itſelf for a few miles about Jeruſalem, and laſted but three hours? The Italians, eſpecially, had no reaſon to remark the event as ſingular; ſince they were accuſtomed, at that time, as they are at preſent, to ſee the *neighbouring regions* ſo darkened for days together by the eruptions of Ætna and Veſuvius, that no man could know his neighbour *. We learn from the ſcripture account, that an earthquake accompanied this darkneſs; and a dark clouded ſky, I apprehend, very frequently precedes an earthquake; but its extent is not great, nor is its intenſeneſs exceſſive, nor is the phænomenon itſelf ſo unuſual, as not commonly to paſs unnoticed in ages of ſcience and hiſtory. I fear, I may be liable to miſrepreſentation in this place; but I beg it may be obſerved, that however ſlight in degree, or however confined in extent, the darkneſs at the crucifixion may have been, I am of opinion, that the power of

* —nos autem tenebras cogitemus tantas, quantæ quondam eruptione Etnæorum ignium *finitimas regiones obſcuraviſſe* dicuntur, ut per biduum nemo hominem homo agnoſceret. Cic. de Nat. Deo. L. 2.—And Pliny, in deſcribing the eruption of Veſuvius, which ſuffocated his uncle, ſays,—Dies alibi, illic nox omnibus noctibus nigrior denſiorque.

God was as ſupernaturally exerted in its production, and in that of the earthquake which accompanied it, as in the opening of the graves, and the reſurrection of the ſaints, which followed the reſurrection of Chriſt.

In another place, you ſeem not to believe "that Pontius Pilate informed the emperor of the unjuſt ſentence of death, which he had pronounced againſt an innocent perſon:" And the ſame reaſon which made him ſilent as to the death, ought, one would ſuppoſe, to have made him ſilent as to the miraculous events, which accompanied it: And if Pilate, in his diſpatches to the emperor, tranſmitted no account of the darkneſs (how great ſoever you ſuppoſe it to have been) which happened in a diſtant province; I cannot apprehend, that the report of it could have ever gained ſuch credit at Rome, as to induce either Pliny or Seneca to mention it as an authentic fact. —

I am, &c.

LETTER

LETTER SIXTH.

SIR,

I MEAN not to detain you long with my remarks upon your ſixteenth chapter; for in a ſhort Apology for Chriſtianity, it cannot be expected that I ſhould apologize at length, for the indiſcretions of the firſt Chriſtians. Nor have I any diſpoſition to reap a malicious pleaſure, from exaggerating, what you have had ſo much goodnatured pleaſure in extenuating, the truculent barbarity of their Roman perſecutors.

M. DE VOLTAIRE has embraced every opportunity of contraſting the perſecuting temper of the Chriſtians with the mild tolerance of the ancient heathens; and I never read a page of his upon this ſubject, without thinking Chriſtianity materially, if not intentionally, obliged to him, for his endeavour to depreſs the lofty ſpirit of religious bigotry. I may with juſtice pay the ſame compliment to you; and I do it with ſin-

cerity; heartily wiſhing, that in the proſecution of your work, you may render every ſpecies of intolerance univerſally deteſtable. There is no reaſon why you ſhould abate the aſperity of your invective; ſince no one can ſuſpect you of a deſign to traduce Chriſtianity, under the guiſe of a zeal againſt perſecution; or if any one ſhould be ſo ſimple, he need but open the Goſpel to be convinced, that ſuch a ſcheme is too palpably abſurd, to have ever entered the head of any ſenſible and impartial man.

I WISH, for the credit of human nature, that I could find reaſon to agree with you, in what you have ſaid of the "univerſal toleration of Polytheiſm; of the mild indifference of antiquity; of the Roman Princes beholding, without concern, a thouſand forms of religion ſubſiſting in peace under their gentle ſway." But there are ſome paſſages in the Roman hiſtory, which make me heſitate at leaſt in this point; and almoſt induce me to believe, that the Romans were exceedingly jealous of all foreign religions, whether they were accompanied with immoral manners or not.

IT was the Roman cuſtom indeed, to invite the tutelary gods of the nations, which they intended

to ſubdue, to abandon their charge; and to promiſe them the ſame, or even a more auguſt worſhip, in the city of Rome;* and their triumphs were graced as much with the exhibition of their captive gods, as with the leſs humane one of their captive kings.† But this cuſtom, though it filled the city with hundreds of gods of every country, denomination and quality, cannot be brought as a proof of Roman toleration; it may indicate the exceſs of their vanity, the extent of their ſuperſtition, or the refinement of their policy; but it can never ſhew, that the religion of individuals, when it differed from public wiſdom, was either connived at as a matter of indifference, or tolerated as an inalienable right of human nature.

Upon another occaſion, you, Sir, have referred to Livy, as relating the introduction and ſuppreſſion of the rites of Bacchus; and in that very place we find him confeſſing, that the prohibiting all foreign religions, and the abol-

* In oppugnationibus, ante omnia ſolitum a Romanis Sacerdotibus evocari Deum, cujus in tutela id oppidum eſſet; promittique illi eundem, aut ampliorem apud Romanos cultum. Plin. Nat. Hiſt. L. 38, C. iv.

† Roma triumphantis quotiens Ducis inclita currum
Plauſibus excepit, totiens altaria Divûm
Addidit ſpoliis ſibimet nova numina fecit. Pruden.

iſhing every mode of ſacrifice which differed from the Roman mode, was a buſineſs frequently entruſted by their anceſtors to the care of the proper magiſtrates; and he gives this reaſon for the procedure, That nothing could contribute more effectually to the ruin of religion, than the ſacrificing after an external rite, and not after the manner inſtituted by their fathers.*

Not thirty years before this event, the Prætor, in conformity to a decree of the Senate, had iſſued an edict—that no one ſhould preſume to ſacrifice in any public place after a new or foreign manner.† And in a ſtill more early period, the Ædiles had been commanded to take care, that no gods were worſhipped, except the Roman gods; and that the Roman gods were

* Quoties hoc patrum avorumque ætate negotium eſt magiſtratibus datum, ut ſacra externa fieri vetarent? ſacrificulos vateſque foro, circo, urbe prohiberent? *vaticinos libros conquirerent comburerentque?* omnem diſciplinam ſacrificandi, præterquam more Romano, abolerent? Judicabant enim prudentiſſimi viri omnis divini humanique juris, nihil æque diſſolvendæ religionis eſſe, quam ubi non patrio, ſed externo ritu ſacrificaretur. Liv. L. xxxix. C. xvi.

† Ut quicumque *libros vaticinos precationeſve*, aut artem ſacrificandi conſcriptam haberet, eos libros omnes literaſque ad ſe ante Kalendas Apriles deferret: neu quis in publico ſacrove loco, novo aut externo ritu ſacrificaret. Liv. L. xxv. C. i.

were worſhipped after no manner, but the eſtabliſhed manner of the country.*

But to come nearer to the times of which you are writing. In Dion Caſſius you may meet with a great courtier, one of the interior cabinet, and a poliſhed ſtateſman, in a ſet ſpeech, upon the moſt momentous ſubject, expreſſing himſelf to the Emperor, in a manner agreeable enough to the practice of antiquity, but utterly inconſiſtent with the moſt remote idea of religious toleration. The ſpeech alluded to contains, I confeſs it, nothing more than the advice of an individual; but it ought to be remembered, that *that* individual was Mæcenas, that the advice was given to Auguſtus, and that the occaſion of giving it was no leſs important than the ſettling the form of the Roman government. He recommends it to Cæſar, to worſhip the gods himſelf, according to the eſtabliſhed form; and to *force* all others to do the ſame; and to *hate* and to *puniſh* all thoſe who ſhould attempt to introduce foreign

* Datum inde negotium Ædilibus, ut animadverterent, ne qui, niſi Romani Dii neu quo alio more, quam patrio colerentur. Liv. L. iv. C. 30.

religions:† Nay, he bids him, in the ſame place, have an eye upon the philoſophers alſo; ſo that free thinking, free ſpeaking, at leaſt, upon religious matters, was not quite ſo ſafe under the gentle ſway of the Roman princes, as, thank God, it is under the much more gentle government of our own.

In the Edict of Toleration publiſhed by Galerius, after ſix years unremitted perſecution of the Chriſtians, we perceive his motive for perſecution to have been the ſame with that which had influenced the conduct of the more ancient Romans, an abhorrence of all innovations in religion. You have favoured us with the tranſlation of this edict, in which he ſays—"we were particularly deſirous of reclaiming into the way of reaſon and nature," *ad bonas mentes* (a good pretence this for a Polytheiſtic perſecutor) "the deluded Chriſtians, who had renounced the religion and ceremonies inſtituted by their fathers"—this is the preciſe language of Livy, deſcribing a perſecution of a foreign religion three hundred years before, *turba erat nec ſacrificantium*

† Ταυτα τε ουτο πραττε, και προσετι το μεν θειον παντε παντας αυτος τε σεβου, κατα τα πατρια, και τους αλλους τιμαν αναγκαζε· τους δε δη ξενιζοντας τι περι αυτο και μισει και κολαζε. Dion Caſ. L. 52.

tantium nec precantium Deos patrio more.— And the very expedient of forcing the Chriſtians to deliver up their religious books, which was practiſed in this perſecution, and which Moſheim attributes to the advice of Hierocles, and you to that of the philoſophers of thoſe times, ſeems clear to me, from the places in Livy before quoted, to have been nothing but an old piece of ſtate policy, to which the Romans had recourſe, as often as they apprehended their eſtabliſhed religion to be in any danger.

In the preamble of the letter of toleration, which the emperor Maximin reluctantly wrote to Sabinus about a year after the publication of Galerius' Edict, there is a plain avowal of the reaſons, which induced Galerius and Diocletian to commence their perſecution; they had ſeen the temples of the gods forſaken, and were determined by the ſeverity of puniſhment to reclaim men to their worſhip.*

In

* Συνειδον σχεδον απαντας ανθρωπους, καλαλειφθεισης της των θεων θρησκειας, τω εθνει των χριστιανων εαυτους συμμεμιχοτας. Ορθως διατεταχεναι παντας ανθρωπους τους απο των θεων των αθανατων αναχωρησαντας, προ δηλω κολασει και τιμωρια εις την θρησκειαν των θεων ανακληθηναι. Euſeb. Lib. ix. C. 1.

In ſhort, the ſyſtem recommended by Mæcenas, of forcing every perſon to be of the emperor's religion, and of hating and puniſhing every innovator, contained no new doctrine; it was correſpondent to the practice of the Roman ſenate, in the moſt illuſtrious times of the republic; and ſeems to have been generally adopted by the emperors, in their treatment of Chriſtians, whilſt they themſelves were Pagans; and in their treatment of Pagans, after they themſelves became Chriſtians; and if any one ſhould be willing to derive thoſe laws againſt Heretics (which are ſo abhorrent from the mild ſpirit of the goſpel, and ſo reproachful to the Roman Code) from the blind adherence of the Chriſtian emperors to the intolerant policy of their Pagan predeceſſors, ſomething, I think, might be produced in ſupport of his conjecture.

But I am ſorry to have ſaid ſo much upon ſuch a ſubject.—In endeavouring to palliate the ſeverity of the Romans towards the Chriſtians, you have remarked, "it was in vain, that the oppreſſed believer aſſerted the inalienable rights of conſcience, and private judgment." "Though his ſituation might excite the pity, his arguments could never reach the

the underſtanding either of the philoſophic, or of the believing part of the Pagan world." How is this, Sir? are the arguments for liberty of conſcience ſo exceedingly inconcluſive, that you think them incapable of reaching the underſtanding, even of philoſophers? A captious adverſary would embrace with avidity the opportunity this paſſage affords him, of blotting your character with the odious ſtain of being a perſecutor; a ſtain, which no learning can wipe out, which no genius or ability can render amiable. I am far from entertaining ſuch an opinion of your principles; but this concluſion ſeems fairly deducible from what you have ſaid,—that the minds of the Pagans were ſo pre-occupied with the notions of forcing, and hating, and puniſhing thoſe, who differed from them in religion, that arguments for the inalienable rights of conſcience, which would have convinced yourſelf and every philoſopher in Europe, and ſtaggered the reſolution of an inquiſitor, were incapable of reaching their underſtandings, or making any impreſſion on their hearts; and you might, perhaps, have ſpared yourſelf ſome perplexity, in the inveſtigation

veſtigation of the motives, which induced the Roman emperors to perſecute, and the Roman people to hate the Chriſtians, if you had not overlooked the true one, and adopted with too great facility the erroneous idea of the extreme tolerance of Pagan Rome.

The Chriſtians, you obſerve, were accuſed of atheiſm:—And it muſt be owned, that they were the greateſt of all atheiſts, in the opinion of the polytheiſts; for, inſtead of Heſiod's thirty thouſand gods, they could not be brought to acknowledge above one; and even that one they refuſed, at the hazard of their lives, to blaſpheme with the appellation of Jupiter. But is it not ſomewhat ſingular, that the pretenſions of the Chriſtians to a conſtant intercourſe with ſuperior beings, in the working of miracles, ſhould have been a principal cauſe of converting to their faith, thoſe who branded them with the imputation of atheiſm?

They were accuſed too of forming dangerous conſpiracies againſt the ſtate:—This accuſation, you own, was as unjuſt as the preceding; but there ſeems to have been a peculiar hardſhip in the ſituation of the Chriſtians;

tians; ſince the very ſame men, who thought them dangerous to the ſtate, on account of their conſpiracies; condemned them, as you have obſerved, for not interfering in its concerns; for their criminal diſregard to the buſineſs of war and government; and for their entertaining doctrines, which were ſuppoſed "to prohibit them from aſſuming the character of ſoldiers, of magiſtrates, and of princes:" Men, ſuch as theſe, would have made but poor conſpirators.

They were accuſed, laſtly, of the moſt horrid crimes:—This accuſation, it is confeſſed, was mere calumny; yet, as calumny is generally more extenſive in its influence than truth, perhaps this calumny might be more powerful in ſtopping the progreſs of Chriſtianity, than the virtues of the Chriſtians were in promoting it: And, in truth, Origen obſerves, that the Chriſtians, on account of the crimes which were maliciouſly laid to their charge, were held in ſuch abhorrence, that no one would ſo much as ſpeak to them. It may be worth while to remark from him, that the Jews, in the very beginning of Chriſtianity, were the authors of all thoſe calumnies,

nies, which Celſus afterwards took ſuch great delight in urging againſt the Chriſtians, and which you have mentioned with ſuch great preciſion.*

It is no improbable ſuppoſition, that the clandeſtine manner, in which the perſecuting ſpirit of the Jews and Gentiles obliged the Chriſtians to celebrate their Euchariſt, together with the expreſſions of eating the body, and drinking the blood of Chriſt, which were uſed in its inſtitution, and the cuſtom of imparting a kiſs of charity to each other, and of calling each other by the appellations of brother and ſiſter,† gave occaſions to their enemies to invent, and induced careleſs obſervers to believe, all the odious things which were ſaid againſt the Chriſtians.

You

* Videtur mihi feciſſe idem Celſus, quod Judæi, qui ſub Chriſtianiſmi initium errorem ſparſere, quaſi ejus ſectæ homines mactati pueri veſcerentur carnibus; et quod, quoties eis libeat operam dare occultis libidinibus, extincto lumine conſtupret, quam quiſque nactus fuerit. Quæ falſa et iniqua opinio dudum valde multos a religione noſtra alienos tenuit; perſuaſos, quod tales ſint Chriſtiani; et ad hoc temporis nonullos fallit: quia ea de cauſa Chriſtianos averſantur, ut nec ſimplex colloquium cum eis habere velint. Orig. con. Cel. Lib. vi.

† The Romans uſed theſe expreſſions in ſo impure a ſenſe, that Martial calls them, Nomina nequiora. Lib. II. Epig. iv.

You have displayed at length, in expressive diction, the accusations of the enemies of Christianity; and you have told us of the imprudent defence, by which the Christians vindicated the purity of their morals; and you have huddled up in a short note (which many a reader will never see) the testimony of Pliny to their innocence; permit me to do the Christians a little justice, by producing in their cause the whole truth.

Between seventy and eighty years after the death of Christ, Pliny had occasion to consult the emperor Trajan, concerning the manner in which he should treat the Christians; it seems as if there had been judicial proceedings against them, though Pliny had never happened to attend any of them. He knew, indeed, that men were to be punished for being Christians, or he would not, as a sensible magistrate, have received the accusations of legal, much less of illegal anonymous informers against them; nor would he, before he wrote to the emperor, have put to death those, whom his threats could not hinder from persevering in their confession, that they were Christians. His harsh manner

of

of proceeding "in an office the moſt repugnant to his humanity," had made many apoſtatize from their profeſſion; perſons of this complexion, were well fitted to inform him of every thing they knew concerning the Chriſtians; accordingly he examined them; but not one of them accuſed the Chriſtians of any other crime, than of praying to Chriſt, as to ſome God, and of binding themſelves by an oath, not to be guilty of any wickedneſs. Not contented with this information, he put two maid ſervants, which were called miniſters, to the torture; but even the rack could not extort from the imbecility of the ſex a confeſſion of any crime, any account different from that which the apoſtates had voluntarily given; not a word do we find of their feaſting upon murdered infants, or of their mixing in inceſtuous commerce. After all his pains, Pliny pronounced the meal of the Chriſtians to be *promiſcuous* and *innocent*: Perſons of both ſexes, of all ages, and of every condition, aſſembled promiſcuouſly together: There was nothing for chaſtity to bluſh at, or for humanity to ſhudder at, in theſe meetings; there was no ſecret

cret initiation of proſelytes by abhorred rites; but they eat a promiſcuous meal in Chriſtian charity, and with the moſt perfect innocence.*

WHATEVER faults, then, the Chriſtians may have been guilty of in after times; though you could produce to us a thouſand ambitious prelates of Carthage, or ſenſual ones of Antioch, and blot ten thouſand pages with the impurities of the Chriſtian clergy; yet at this period, whilſt the memory of Chriſt and his Apoſtles was freſh in their minds; or, in the more emphatic language of Jerome, "whilſt the blood of our Lord was warm, and recent faith was fervent in the believers;" we have the greateſt reaſon to conclude, that they were eminently diſtinguiſhed for the probity and the purity of their lives. Had there been but a ſhadow of a crime in their aſſemblies,

* — affirmabant autem, hanc fuiſſe ſummam vel culpæ ſuæ, vel erroris, quod eſſent ſoliti ſtato die ante lucem convenire: carmenque Chriſto, quaſi Deo, dicere ſecum invicem: ſeque ſacramento non *in ſælus* aliquod obſtringere, ſed ne furta, ne latrocinia, ne adulteria committerent, ne fidem fallerent, ne depoſitum appellati abnegarent: quibus peractis, morem ſibi diſcedendi fuiſſe, rurſuſque coeundi ad capiendum cibum, *promiſcuum* tamen, *et innoxium*. Plin. Epiſ. xcvii. Lib. x.

it muſt have been detected by the induſtrious ſearch of the intelligent Pliny; and it is a matter of real ſurprize, that no one of the apoſtates thought of paying court to the governor, by a falſe teſtimony; eſpecially, as the apoſtacy ſeems to have been exceeding general; ſince the temples, which had been almoſt deſerted, began again to be frequented; and the victims, for which a little time before ſcarce a purchaſer was to be found, began again every where to be bought up. This, Sir, is a valuable teſtimony in our favour; it is not that of a declaiming apologiſt, of a deluding prieſt, or of a deluded martyr, of an orthodox biſhop, or of any "of the moſt pious of men," the Chriſtians; but it is that of a Roman magiſtrate, philoſopher, and lawyer; who cannot be ſuppoſed to have wanted inclination to detect the immoralities, or the conſpiracies of the Chriſtians; ſince, in his treatment of them, he had ſtretched the authority of his office, and violated alike the laws of his country, and of humanity.

With this teſtimony, I will conclude my remarks; for I have no diſpoſition to blacken

en the character you have given of Nero; or to leſſen the humanity of the Roman magiſtrates; or to magnify the number of Chriſtians, or of martyrs; or to undertake the defence of a few fanatics, who by their injudicious zeal brought ruin upon themſelves, and diſgrace upon their profeſſion. I may not probably have convinced you, that you are wrong in any thing, which you have advanced; or that the authors you have quoted, will not ſupport you in the inferences you have drawn from their works; or that Chriſtianity ought to be diſtinguiſhed from its corruptions; yet I may, perhaps, have had the good fortune to leſſen, in the minds of others, ſome of that diſlike to the Chriſtian religion, which the peruſal of your book had unhappily excited. I have touched but upon general topics; for I ſhould have wearied out your patience, to ſay nothing of my readers', or my own, had I enlarged upon every thing in which I diſſent from you; and a minute examination of your work would, moreover, have had the appearance of a captious diſpoſition to deſcend into illiberal perſonalities; and might have produced a cer-

tain acrimony of ſentiment or expreſſion, which may be ſerviceable in ſupplying the place of argument, or adding a zeſt to a dull compoſition; but has nothing to do with the inveſtigation of truth. Sorry ſhall I be, if what I have written, ſhould give the leaſt interruption to the proſecution of the great work, in which you are engaged; the world is now poſſeſſed of the opinion of us both, upon the ſubject in queſtion; and it may, perhaps, be proper for us both to leave it in this ſtate; I ſay not this, from any backwardneſs to acknowledge my miſtakes, when I am convinced that I am in an error; but to expreſs the almoſt inſuperable reluctance, which I feel to the bandying abuſive argument, in public controverſy: It is not, in good truth, a difficult taſk, to chaſtiſe the froward petulance of thoſe, who miſtake perſonal invective for reaſoning, and clumſy banter for ingenuity; but it is a dirty buſineſs at beſt, and ſhould never be undertaken by a man of any temper, except when the intereſts of truth may ſuffer by his neglect. Nothing of this nature, I am ſenſible, is to be expected from you; and if any thing of the kind has

happened

happened to escape myself, I hereby disclaim the intention of saying it, and heartily wish it unsaid.

WILL you permit me, Sir, through this channel (I may not, perhaps, have another so good opportunity of doing it) to address a few words? not to yourself, but to a set of men, who disturb all serious company with their profane declamation against Christianity; and who having picked up in their travels, or the writings of the deists, a few flimsy objections, infect with their ignorant and irreverent ridicule the ingenuous minds of the rising generation.

GENTLEMEN,

SUPPOSE the mighty work accompliſhed, the croſs trampled upon, Chriſtianity every where proſcribed, and the religion of Nature once more become the religion of Europe; what advantage will you have derived to your country, or to yourſelves, from the exchange? I know your anſwer—you will have freed the world from the hypocriſy of Prieſts, and the tyranny of Superſtition.—No; you forget that Lycurgus, and Numa, and Odin, and Mango-Copac, and all the great legiſlators of ancient and modern ſtory, have been of opinion, that the affairs of civil ſociety could not well be conducted without *ſome* religion; you muſt of neceſſity introduce a prieſthood, with, probably, as much hypocriſy; a religion, with, aſſuredly, more ſuperſtition, than that which you now reprobate with ſuch indecent and ill-grounded contempt. But I will tell you from what you will have freed the world; you will have freed it from its abhorrence of vice, and from every pow-

erful

erful incentive to virtue; you will, with the religion, have brought back the depraved morality of Paganiſm; you will have robbed mankind of their firm aſſurance of another life; and thereby you will have deſpoiled them of their patience, of their humility, of their charity, of their chaſtity, of all thoſe mild and ſilent virtues, which (however deſpicable they may appear in your eyes) are the only ones which meliorate and ſublime our nature; which Paganiſm never knew, which ſpring from Chriſtianity alone, which do or might conſtitute our comfort in this life, and without the poſſeſſion of which, another life, if after all there ſhould happen to be one, muſt (unleſs a miracle be exerted in the alteration of our diſpoſition) be more vicious and more miſerable than this is.

PERHAPS you will contend, that the univerſal right of reaſon, that the truth and fitneſs of things, are of themſelves ſufficient to exalt the nature, and regulate the manners of mankind. Shall we never have done with this groundleſs commendation of natural law? Look into the firſt chapter of Paul's Epiſtle to the Romans, and you will ſee the extent of its influence over the Gentiles of thoſe days; or if you diſlike

Paul's authority, and the manners of antiquity, look into the more admired accounts of modern Voyagers; and examine its influence over the Pagans of our own times, over the ſenſual inhabitants of Otahitè, over the Cannibals of New Zealand, or the remorſeleſs Savages of America. But theſe men are Barbarians.—Your law of nature, notwithſtanding, extends even to them:—But they have miſuſed their reaſon;—they have then the more need of, and would be the more thankful for that revelation, which you, with an ignorant and faſtidious ſelf-ſufficiency, deem uſeleſs.—But, they might of themſelves, if they thought fit, become wiſe and virtuous.—I anſwer with Cicero, *ut nihil intereſt, utrum nemo valeat, an nemo valere poſſit; ſic non intelligo quid interſit, utrum nemo ſit ſapiens, an nemo eſſe poſſit.*

These however, you will think, are extraordinary inſtances; and that we ought not from theſe, to take our meaſure of the excellency of the law of nature; but rather from the civilized ſtates of China and Japan, or from the nations which flouriſhed in learning and in arts, before Chriſtianity was heard of in the world. You mean to ſay, that by the law of nature, which you are

deſirous

deſirous of ſubſtituting in the room of the goſpel, you do not underſtand thoſe rules of conduct, which an individual, abſtracted from the community, and deprived of the inſtitution of mankind, could excogitate for himſelf; but ſuch a ſyſtem of precepts, as the moſt enlightened men of the moſt enlightened ages have recommended to our obſervance. Where do you find this ſyſtem? We cannot meet with it in the works of Stobæus, or the Scythian Anacharſis, nor in thoſe of Plato or Cicero, nor in thoſe of the Emperor Antoninus, or the ſlave Epictetus; for we are perſuaded, that the moſt animated conſiderations of the πρεπον, and the *honeſtum*, of the beauty of virtue, and the fitneſs of things, are not able to furniſh, even a Brutus himſelf, with permanent principles of action; much leſs are they able to purify the polluted receſſes of a vitiated heart, to curb the irregularity of appetite, or reſtrain the impetuoſity of paſſion in common men. If you order us to examine the works of Grotius, or Puffendorf, of Burlamaqui, or Hutchinſon, for what you underſtand by the law of nature; we apprehend that you are in a great error, in taking your notions of natural law, as diſcoverable by natural reaſon,

from

from the elegant ſyſtems of it, which have been drawn up by Chriſtian Philoſophers; ſince they have all laid their foundations, either tacitly or expreſsly, upon a principle derived from revelation, a thorough knowledge of the Being and attributes of God; and even thoſe amongſt yourſelves, who rejecting Chriſtianity ſtill continue Theiſts, are indebted to revelation (whether you are either aware of, or diſpoſed to acknowledge the debt, or not) for thoſe ſublime ſpeculations concerning the Deity, which you have fondly attributed to the excellency of your own unaſſiſted reaſon. If you would know the real genius of natural law, and how far it can proceed in the inveſtigation or enforcement of moral duties; you muſt conſult the manners and the writings of thoſe, who have never heard of either the Jewiſh or the Chriſtian diſpenſation, or of thoſe other manifeſtations of himſelf, which God vouchſafed to Adam and to the Patriarchs, before and after the flood. It would be difficult perhaps any where, to find a people entirely deſtitute of traditionary notices concerning a Deity, and of traditionary fears or expectations of another life; and the morals of mankind may have, perhaps, been no where quite ſo

abandoned

abandoned as they would have been, had they been left wholly to themſelves in theſe points: However, it is a truth, which cannot be denied, how much ſoever it may be lamented, that though the generality of mankind have always had ſome faint conceptions of God, and his providence; yet they have been always greatly inefficacious in the production of good morality, and highly derogatory to his nature, amongſt all the people of the earth, except the Jews and Chriſtians; and ſome may perhaps be deſirous of excepting the Mahometans, who derive all that is good in their *Koran* from Chriſtianity.

THE laws concerning juſtice, and the reparation of damages, concerning the ſecurity of property, and the performance of contracts; concerning, in ſhort, whatever affects the well-being of civil ſociety, have been every where underſtood with ſufficient preciſion; and if you chooſe to ſtile Juſtinian's code, a code of natural law, though you will err againſt propriety of ſpeech, yet you are ſo far in the right, that natural reaſon diſcovered, and the depravity of human nature compelled human kind, to eſtabliſh by proper ſanctions the laws therein contained;

contained; and you will have moreover Carneades, no mean Philoſopher, on your ſide; who knew of no law of nature, different from that which men had inſtituted for their common utility; and which was various according to the manners of men in different climates, and changeable with a change of times in the ſame. And, in truth, in all countries where Paganiſm has been the eſtabliſhed religion, though a philoſopher may now and then have ſtepped beyond the paltry preſcript of civil juriſprudence, in his purſuit of virtue; yet the bulk of mankind have ever been contented with that ſcanty pittance of morality, which enabled them to eſcape the laſh of civil puniſhment: I call it a ſcanty pittance; becauſe a man may be intemperate, iniquitous, impious, a thouſand ways a profligate and a villain, and yet elude the cognizance, and avoid the puniſhment of civil laws.

I AM ſenſible, you will be ready to ſay, what is all this to the purpoſe? though the bulk of mankind may never be able to inveſtigate the laws of natural religion, nor diſpoſed to reverence their ſanctions when inveſtigated by others, nor ſolicitous about any other ſtandard of moral rectitude, than civil legiſlation; yet the inconveniences

veniences which may attend the extirpation of Chriſtianity, can be no proof of its truth:—I have not produced them, as a proof of its truth; but they are a ſtrong and concluſive proof, if not of its truth, at leaſt of its utility; and the conſideration of its utility, may be a motive to yourſelves for examining, whether it may not chance to be true; and it ought to be a reaſon with every good citizen, and with every man of ſound judgment, to keep his opinions to himſelf, if from any particular circumſtances in his ſtudies, or in his education, he ſhould have the misfortune to think that it is not true. If you can diſcover to the riſing generation a better religion than the Chriſtian, one that will more effectually animate their hopes, and ſubdue their paſſions, make them better men or better members of ſociety, we importune you to publiſh it for their advantage; but till you can do that, we beg of you not to give the reins to their paſſions, by inſtilling into their unſuſpicious minds your pernicious prejudices: Even now, men ſcruple not, by their lawleſs luſt, to ruin the repoſe of private families, and to fix a ſtain of infamy upon the nobleſt: Even now, they heſitate not, in lifting up a murderous arm againſt

againſt the life of their friend, or againſt their own, as often as the fever of intemperance ſtimulates their reſentment; or the ſatiety of an uſeleſs life excites their deſpondency: Even now, whilſt we are perſuaded of a reſurrection from the dead, and of a *judgment to come*, we find it difficult enough to reſiſt the ſolicitations of ſenſe, and to eſcape unſpotted from the licentious manners of the world: But what will become of our virtue, what of the conſequent peace and happineſs of ſociety, if you perſuade us, that there are no ſuch things? in two words,—you may ruin yourſelves by your attempt, and you will certainly ruin your country by your ſucceſs.

But the conſideration of the inutility of your deſign, is not the only one, which ſhould induce you to abandon it; the argument *à tuto* ought to be warily managed, or it may tend to the ſilencing our oppoſition to any ſyſtem of ſuperſtition which has had the good fortune to be ſanctified by public authority; it is, indeed, liable to no objection in the preſent caſe; we do not, however, wholly rely upon its cogency. It is not contended, that Chriſtianity is to be received, merely becauſe it is uſeful; but becauſe

cauſe it is true. This you deny, and think your objections well grounded; we conceive them originating in your vanity, your immorality, or your miſapprehenſion. There are many worthleſs doctrines, many ſuperſtitious obſervances, which the fraud or folly of mankind have every where annexed to Chriſtianity (eſpecially in the church of Rome) as eſſential parts of it; if you take theſe ſorry appendages to Chriſtianity, for Chriſtianity itſelf, as preached by Chriſt, and by the Apoſtles; if you confound the Roman with the Chriſtian religion, you quite miſapprehend its nature; and are in a ſtate ſimilar to that of men, mentioned by Plutarch, in his treatiſe of ſuperſtition; who flying from ſuperſtition, leapt over religion, and ſunk into downright Atheiſm.*—Chriſtianity is not a religion very palatable to a voluptuous age; it

* Le Papiſme, ſays Helvetius in a Poſthumous Work, n' eſt aux yeux d' un homme ſensè qu' une pure idolatrie—nous ſommes étonnès de l' abſurditè de la religion païenne. Cella de la religion Papiſte étonnera bien d' avantage un jour la poſteritè.—We truſt, that day is not at a great diſtance, and deiſm will then be buried in the ruins of the church of Rome; for the taking the ſuperſtition, the avarice, the ambition, the intoleranée of Antichriſtianiſm for Chriſtianity, has been the great error, upon which infidelity has built its ſyſtem both at home and abroad.

it will not conform its precepts to the ſtandard of faſhion; it will not leſſen the deformity of vice by lenient appellations; but calls keeping, whoredom; intrigue, adultery; and duelling, murder; it will not pander the luſt, it will not licence the intemperance of mankind; it is a troubleſome monitor to a man of pleaſure; and your way of life may have made you quarrel with your religion.—As to your vanity, as a cauſe of your infidelity, ſuffer me to produce the ſentiments of M. Bayle upon that head; if the deſcription does not ſuit your character, you will not be offended at it; and if you are offended with its freedom, it will do you good. "This inclines me to believe, that Libertines, like Des-Barreaux, are not greatly perſuaded of the truth of what they ſay. They have made no deep examination; they have learned ſome few objections, which they are perpetually making a noiſe with; they ſpeak from a principle of oſtentation, and give themſelves the lie in the time of danger.—Vanity has a greater ſhare in their diſputes, than conſcience; they imagine, that the ſingularity and boldneſs of the opinions which they maintain, will give them the reputation of men of parts:—By degrees, they get a

habit

habit of holding impious diſcourſes; and if their vanity be accompanied by a voluptuous life, their progreſs in that road is the ſwifter." *

THE main ſtreſs of your objections reſts not upon the inſufficiency of the external evidence to the truth of Chriſtianity; for few of you, though you may become the future ornaments of the ſenate, or of the bar, have ever employed an hour in its examination; but upon the difficulty of the doctrines, contained in the New Teſtament: They exceed, you ſay, your comprehenſion; and you felicitate yourſelves, that you are not yet arrived at the true ſtandard of orthodox faith,—*credo quia impoſſibile.* You think it would be taking a ſuperfluous trouble, to enquire into the nature of the external proofs by which Chriſtianity is eſtabliſhed; ſince, in your opinion, the book itſelf carries with it its own refutation. A gentleman as acute, probably, as any of you; and who once believed, perhaps as little as any of you, has drawn a quite different concluſion from the peruſal of the New Teſtament; his book (however exceptionable it may be thought in ſome particular parts) exhibits

* Bayle, Hiſt. Dict. Art. Des-Barreaux.

its not only a diſtinguiſhed triumph of reaſon over prejudice, of Chriſtianity over Deiſm; but it exhibits, what is infinitely more rare, the character of a man, who has had courage and candour enough to acknowledge it.*

But what if there ſhould be ſome incomprehenſible doctrines in the Chriſtian religion; ſome circumſtances, which in their cauſes, or their conſequences, ſurpaſs the reach of human reaſon; are they to be rejected upon that account? You are, or would be thought, men of reading, and knowledge, and enlarged underſtandings; weigh the matter fairly; and conſider whether revealed religion be not, in this reſpect, juſt upon the ſame footing, with every other object of your contemplation. Even in mathematics, the ſcience of demonſtration itſelf, though you get over its firſt principles, and learn to digeſt the idea of a point without parts, a line without breadth, and a ſurface without thickneſs; yet you will find yourſelves at a loſs to comprehend the perpetual approximation of lines, which can never meet; the doctrine of incommenſurables, and of an infinity of infinites, each

* See A View of the Internal Evidence, &c. by Soame Jenyns.

each infinitely greater, or infinitely leſs, not only than any finite quantity, but than each other. In phyſics, you cannot comprehend the primary cauſe of any thing; not of the light, by which you ſee; nor of the elaſticity of the air, by which you hear; nor of the fire, by which you are warmed. In phyſiology, you cannot tell, what firſt gave motion to the heart; nor what continues it; nor why its motion is leſs voluntary, than that of the lungs; nor why you are able to move your arm, to the right or left, by a ſimple volition: You cannot explain the cauſe of animal heat; nor comprehend the principle, by which your body was at firſt formed, nor by which it is ſuſtained, nor by which it will be reduced to earth. In natural religion, you cannot comprehend the eternity or omnipreſence of the Deity; nor eaſily underſtand, how his preſcience can be conſiſtent with your freedom, or his immutability with his government of moral agents; nor why he did not make all his creatures equally perfect; nor why he did not create them ſooner: In ſhort, you cannot look into any branch of knowledge, but you will meet with ſubjects above your comprehenſion. The fall and the redemption of human kind, are not more incomprehenſible, than the creation

and the conſervation of the univerſe; the infinite Author of the works of providence, and of nature, is equally inſcrutable, equally paſt our finding out in them both. And it is ſomewhat remarkable, that the deepeſt enquirers into nature, have ever thought with moſt reverence, and ſpoken with moſt diffidence, concerning thoſe things, which in revealed religion may ſeem hard to be underſtood; they have ever avoided that ſelf-ſufficiency of knowledge, which ſprings from ignorance, produces indifference, and ends in infidelity. Admirable to this purpoſe, is the reflection of the greateſt mathematician of the preſent age, when he is combating an opinion of Newton's, by an hypotheſis of his own, ſtill leſs defenſible than that which he oppoſes:—Tous les jours que je vois de ces eſprits-forts, qui critique les verités de notre religion, et s'en mocquent meme avec la plus impertinente ſuffiſance, je penſe, chetifs mortels! combien et combien des choſes ſur leſquels vous raiſonnez ſi legerement, ſont elles plus ſublimes, et plus elevés, que celles ſur leſquelles le grand Newton s'egare ſi groſſierement.*

PLATO

* Euler.

PLATO mentions a ſet of men, who were very ignorant, and thought themſelves ſupremely wiſe; and who rejected the argument for the being of a God, derived from the harmony and order of the univerſe, as old and trite; † there have been men, it ſeems, in all ages, who in affecting ſingularity, have overlooked truth: An argument, however, is not the worſe for being old; and ſurely it would have been a more juſt mode of reaſoning, if you had examined the external evidence for the truth of Chriſtianity, weighed the old arguments from miracles, and from prophecies, before you had rejected the whole account from the difficulties you met with in it. You would laugh at an Indian, who in peeping into a hiſtory of England, and meeting with the mention of the Thames being frozen, or of a ſhower of hail, or of ſnow, ſhould throw the book aſide, as unworthy of his further notice, from his want of ability to comprehend theſe phænomena.

IN conſidering the argument from miracles, you will ſoon be convinced, that it is poſſible for God to work miracles; and you will be convinced, that it is as poſſible for human teſti-

† De Leg. Lib. x.

mony to eſtabliſh the truth of miraculous, as of phyſical or hiſtorical events; but before you can be convinced, that the miracles in queſtion are ſupported by ſuch teſtimony as deſerves to be credited, you muſt enquire at what period, and by what perſons, the books of the old and new Teſtament were compoſed; if you reject the account, without making this examination, you reject it from prejudice, not from reaſon.

THERE is, however, a ſhort method of examining this argument, which may, perhaps, make as great an impreſſion on your minds, as any other. Three men of diſtinguiſhed abilities roſe up at different times, and attacked Chriſtianity with every objection which their malice could ſuggeſt, or their learning could deviſe; but neither Celſus in the ſecond century, nor Porphyry in the third, nor the emperor Julian himſelf in the fourth century, ever queſtioned the reality of the miracles related in the Goſpels. Do but you grant us, what theſe men (who were more likely to know the truth of the matter, than you can be) granted to their adverſaries, and we will very readily let you make the moſt of the Magic, to which, as the laſt wretched ſhift, they were forced to attribute them. We

can

can find you men, in our days, who from the mixture of two colourleſs liquors, will produce you a third as red as blood, or of any other colour you deſire; *et dicto citius*, by a drop reſembling water, will reſtore the tranſparency; they will make two fluids coaleſce into a ſolid body; and from the mixture of liquors colder than ice, will inſtantly raiſe you a horrid exploſion and a tremendous flame: Theſe, and twenty other tricks, they will perform, without having been ſent with our Saviour to Egypt to learn magic; nay, with a bottle or two of oil, they will compoſe the undulations of a lake; and by a little art, they will reſtore the functions of life to a man, who has been an hour or two under water, or a day or two buried in the ſnow: But in vain will theſe men, or the greateſt Magician that Egypt ever ſaw, ſay to a boiſterous ſea, *Peace, be ſtill*; in vain will they ſay to a carcaſe rotting in the grave, *Come forth*; the winds and the ſea will not obey them, and the putrid carcaſe will not hear them. You need not ſuffer yourſelves to be deprived of the weight of this argument, from its having been obſerved, that the Fathers have acknowledged the ſupernatural part of Paganiſm; ſince the Fathers were in no condition

to detect a cheat, which was ſupported both by the diſpoſition of the people, and the power of the civil magiſtate; * and they were from that inability, forced to attribute to infernal agency, what was too cunningly contrived to be detected, and contrived for too impious a purpoſe, to be credited as the work of God.

With reſpect to prophecy, you may, perhaps, have accuſtomed yourſelves to conſider it, as originating in Aſiatic enthuſiaſm, in Chaldean myſtery, or in the ſubtle ſtratagem of intereſted prieſts; and have given yourſelves no more trouble concerning the predictions of ſacred, than concerning the oracles of Pagan hiſtory. Or if you have ever caſt a glance upon this ſubject, the diſſenſions of learned men concerning the proper interpretation of the Revelation, and other difficult prophecies, may have made you raſhly conclude, that all prophecies were equally unintelligible; and more indebted for their accompliſhment, to a fortunate concurrence of events, and the pliant ingenuity of the expoſitor, than to the inſpired foreſight of the prophet.

* See Ld. Lyttlet. Obſ. on St. Paul, p. 59.

prophet. In all that the prophets of the Old Teſtament have delivered, concerning the deſtruction of particular cities, and the deſolation of particular kingdoms, you may ſee nothing but ſhrewd conjectures, which any one acquainted with the hiſtory of the riſe and fall of empires, might certainly have made: And as you would not hold him for a prophet, who ſhould now affirm, that London or Paris would afford to future ages, a ſpectacle juſt as melancholy as that which we now contemplate with a ſigh, in the ruins of Agrigentum or Palmyra; ſo you cannot perſuade yourſelves to believe, that the denunciations of the prophets againſt the haughty cities of Tyre or Babylon, for inſtance, proceeded from the inſpiration of the Deity. There is no doubt, that by ſome ſuch general kind of reaſoning, many are inufluenced to pay no attention to an argument, which, if properly conſidered, carries with it the ſtrongeſt conviction.

SPINOZA ſaid, That he would have broken his atheiſtic ſyſtem to pieces, and embraced without repugnance the ordinary faith of Chriſtians, if he could have perſuaded himſelf

ſelf of the reſurrection of Lazarus from the dead; and I queſtion not, that there are many diſbelievers, who would relinquiſh their Deiſtic tenets, and receive the goſpel, if they could perſuade themſelves, that God had ever ſo far interfered in the moral government of the world, as to illumine the mind of any one man with the knowledge of future events. A miracle ſtrikes the ſenſes of the perſons who ſee it, a prophecy addreſſes itſelf to the underſtandings of thoſe who behold its completion; and it requires in many caſes ſome learning, in all ſome attention, to judge of the correſpondence of events with the predictions concerning them. No one can be convinced, that what Jeremiah and the other prophets foretold of the fate of Babylon, that it ſhould be beſieged by the Medes; that it ſhould be taken, when her mighty men were drunken, when her ſprings were dried up; and that it ſhould become a pool of water, and ſhould remain deſolate forever; no one, I ſay, can be convinced, that all theſe, and other parts of the prophetic denunciation, have been minutely fulfilled, without ſpending ſome time in reading the accounts

accounts which profane hiſtorians have delivered down to us concerning its being taken by Cyrus; and which modern travellers have given us of its preſent ſituation.

PORPHYRY was ſo perſuaded of the coincidence between the prophecies of Daniel and the events, that he was forced to affirm, the prophecies were written, after the things propheſied of had happened; another Porphyry has, in our days, been ſo aſtoniſhed at the correſpondence between the prophecy concerning the deſtruction of Jeruſalem, as related by St. Matthew, and the hiſtory of that event, as recorded by Joſephus; that rather than embrace Chriſtianity, he has ventured (contrary to the faith of all eccleſiaſtical hiſtory, the opinion of the learned of all ages, and all the rules of good criticiſm) to aſſert, that St. Matthew wrote his goſpel after Jeruſalem had been taken and deſtroyed by the Romans. You may from theſe inſtances perceive the ſtrength of the argument from prophecy; it has not been able indeed to vanquiſh the prejudices of either the ancient or the modern Porphyry; but it has been able to compel them both, to be guilty of obvious falſehoods,

falſehoods, which have nothing but impudent aſſertions to ſupport them.

Some over-zealous interpreters of ſcripture have found propheſies in ſimple narrations, extended real predictions beyond the times and circumſtances to which they naturally were applied, and perplexed their readers with a thouſand quaint alluſions and allegorical conceits; this proceeding has made men of ſenſe pay leſs regard to prophecy in general; there are ſome predictions, however, ſuch as thoſe concerning the preſent ſtate of the Jewiſh people, and the corruption of Chriſtianity, which are now fulfilling in the world; and which, if you will take the trouble to examine them, you will find of ſuch an extraordinary nature, that you will not perhaps heſitate to refer them to God as their author; and if you once become perſuaded of the truth of any one miracle, or of the completion of any one prophecy, you will reſolve all your difficulties (concerning the manner of God's interpoſition, in the moral government of our ſpecies, and the nature of the doctrines contained in revelation) into your own inability fully to comprehend the whole ſcheme of divine providence.

We are told, however, that the ſtrangeneſs of the narration, and the difficulty of the doctrines contained in the New Teſtament, are not the only circumſtances which induce you to reject it; you have diſcovered, you think, ſo many contradictions, in the accounts which the Evangeliſts have given of the life of Chriſt, that you are compelled to conſider the whole as an ill-digeſted and improbable ſtory. You would not reaſon thus upon any other occaſion; you would not reject as fabulous the accounts given by Livy and Polybius of Hannibal and the Carthaginians, though you ſhould diſcover a difference betwixt them in ſeveral points of little importance. You cannot compare the hiſtory of the ſame events as delivered by any two hiſtorians, but you will meet with many circumſtances; which, though mentioned by one, are either wholly omitted or differently related by the other; and this obſervation is peculiarly applicable to biographical writings: But no one ever thought of diſbelieving the leading circumſtances of the lives of Vitellius or Veſpaſian, becauſe Tacitus and Suetonius did not in every thing correſpond in their accounts of theſe emperors;

tors; and if the memoirs of the life and doctrines of M. de Voltaire himself were, some twenty or thirty years after his death, to be delivered to the world by four of his most intimate acquaintance; I do not apprehend that we should discredit the whole account of such an extraordinary man, by reason of some slight inconsistences and contradictions, which the avowed enemies of his name might chance to discover in the several narrations. Though we should grant you, then, that the Evangelists had fallen into some trivial contradictions, in what they have related concerning the life of Christ; yet you ought not to draw any other inference from our concession, than that they had not plotted together, as cheats would have done, in order to give an unexceptionable consistency to their fraud. We are not, however, disposed to make you any such concession; we will rather shew you the futility of your general argument, by touching upon a few of the places, which you think are most liable to your censure.

You observe, that neither Luke, nor Mark, nor John, have mentioned the cruelty of Herod in murdering the infants of Bethlehem; and

and that no account is to be found of this matter in Joſephus, who wrote the life of Herod; and, therefore, the fact recorded by Matthew is not true.—The concurrent teſtimony of many independent writers concerning a matter of fact unqueſtionably adds to its probability; but if nothing is to be received as true, upon the teſtimony of a ſingle author, we muſt give up ſome of the beſt writers, and diſbelieve ſome of the moſt inteſting facts of ancient hiſtory.

According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there was only an interval of three months, you ſay, between the baptiſm and crucifixion of Jeſus; from which time taking away the forty days of the temptation, there will only remain about ſix weeks for the whole period of his public miniſtry; which laſted however, according to St. John, at the leaſt above three years.—Your objection fairly ſtated ſtands thus. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in writing the hiſtory of Jeſus Chriſt, mention the ſeveral events of his life, as following one another in continued ſucceſſion, without taking notice of the times in which they happened; but is it a juſt concluſion from

from their ſilence, to infer that there really were no intervals of time between the tranſactions which they ſeem to have connected? Many inſtances might be produced from the moſt admired biographers of antiquity, in which events are related, as immediately conſequent to each other, which did not happen but at very diſtant periods: We have an obvious example of this manner of writing in St. Matthew; who connects the preaching of John the Baptiſt with the return of Joſeph from Egypt, though we are certain, that the latter event preceded the former by a great many years.

JOHN has ſaid nothing of the inſtitution of the Lord's ſupper; the other Evangeliſts have ſaid nothing of the waſhing of the diſciples' feet:—What then? are you not aſhamed to produce theſe facts, as inſtances of contradictions? if omiſſions are contradictions, look into the hiſtory of the age of Louis the fourteenth, or into the general hiſtory of M. de Voltaire, and you will meet with a great abundance of contradictions.

JOHN, in mentioning the diſcourſe which Jeſus had with his mother and his beloved diſciple, at the time of his crucifixion, ſays, that

that ſhe, with Mary Magdalene, ſtood near the croſs; Matthew, on the other hand, ſays, that Mary Magdalene and the other women were there, beholding afar off: This you think a manifeſt contradiction; and ſcoffingly enquire, whether the women and the beloved diſciple, which were near the croſs, could be the ſame with thoſe who ſtood far from the croſs?—It is difficult not to tranſgreſs the bounds of moderation and good manners, in anſwering ſuch ſophiſtry; what! have you to learn, that though the Evangeliſts ſpeak of the crucifixion, as of one event, it was not accompliſhed in one inſtant, but laſted ſeveral hours? And why the women, who were at a diſtance from the croſs, might not, during its continuance, draw near the croſs; or from being near the croſs, might not move from the croſs, is more than you can explain to either us, or yourſelves. And we take from you your only refuge, by denying expreſsly, that the different Evangeliſts, in their mention of the women, ſpeak of the ſame point of time.

THE Evangeliſts, you affirm, are fallen into groſs contradictions, in their accounts of

the appearances, by which Jeſus manifeſted himſelf to his diſciples, after his reſurrection from the dead; for Matthew ſpeaks of two, Mark of three, Luke of two, and John of four. That contradictory propoſitions cannot be true, is readily granted; and if you will produce the place, in which Matthew ſays, that Jeſus Chriſt appeared twice and *no oftener*, it will be further granted, that he is contradicted by John, in a very material part of his narration; but till you do that, you muſt excuſe me, if I cannot grant that the Evangeliſts have contradicted each other in this point; for to common underſtandings it is pretty evident, that if Chriſt appeared four times, according to John's account, he muſt have appeared twice, according to that of Matthew and Luke, and thrice, according to that of Mark.

The different Evangeliſts are not only accuſed of contradicting each other, but Luke is ſaid to have contradicted himſelf; for in his Goſpel he tells us, that Jeſus aſcended into heaven from Bethany; and in the Acts of the Apoſtles, of which he is the reputed author, he informs us, that he aſcended from Mount Olivet.

—Your

—Your objection proceeds either from your ignorance of geography, or your ill-will to Chriſtianity; and upon either ſuppoſition deſerves our contempt: Be pleaſed, however, to remember for the future, that Bethany was not only the name of a town, but of a diſtrict of Mount Olivet adjoining to the town.

FROM this ſpecimen of the contradictions, aſcribed to the hiſtorians of the life of Chriſt, you may judge for yourſelves, what little reaſon there is to reject Chriſtianity upon their account; and how ſadly you will be impoſed upon, (in a matter of more conſequence to you than any other) if you take every thing for a contradiction, which the uncandid adverſaries of Chriſtianity think proper to call one.

BEFORE I put an end to this addreſs, I cannot help taking notice of an argument, by which ſome philoſophers have of late endeavoured to overturn the whole ſyſtem of revelation: And it is the more neceſſary to give an anſwer to their objection, as it is become a common ſubject of philoſophical converſation, eſpecially amongſt thoſe who have viſited the continent. The objection tends to invalidate, as is ſuppoſed, the

authority of Moſes; by ſhewing, that the earth is much older, than it can be proved to be from his account of the creation, and the ſcripture chronology. We contend, that ſix thouſand years have not yet elapſed ſince the creation; and theſe philoſophers contend, that they have indubitable proof of the earth's being at the leaſt fourteen thouſand years old; and they complain, that Moſes hangs as a dead weight upon them, and blunts all their zeal for enquiry.*

The Canonico Recupero, who it ſeems is engaged in writing the hiſtory of Mount Etna, has diſcovered a ſtratum of lava, which flowed from that mountain, according to his opinion, in the time of the ſecond Punic war, or about two thouſand years ago; this ſtratum is not yet covered with ſoil, ſufficient for the production of either corn or vines; it requires then, ſays the Canon, two thouſand years, at leaſt, to convert a ſtratum of lava into a fertile field. In ſinking a pit near *Jaci*, in the neighbourhood of Etna, they have diſcovered evident marks of ſeven diſtinct lavas, one under the other; the ſurfaces of which are parallel, and moſt of them covered

* Brydone's Travels.

covered with a thick bed of rich earth; now the eruption which formed the loweſt of theſe lavas (if I may be allowed to reaſon, ſays the Canon, from analogy) flowed from the mountain at leaſt fourteen thouſand years ago.—It might be briefly anſwered to this objection, by denying, that there is any thing in the hiſtory of Moſes repugnant to this opinion concerning the great antiquity of the earth; for though the riſe and progreſs of arts and ſciences, and the ſmall multiplication of the human ſpecies, render it almoſt to a demonſtration probable, that man has not exiſted longer upon the ſurface of this earth, than according to the Moſaic account; yet, that the earth itſelf was then created out of nothing, when man was placed upon it, is not, according to the ſentiments of ſome philoſophers, to be proved from the original text of ſacred ſcripture; we might, I ſay, reply with theſe philoſophers, to this formidable objection of the Canon, by granting it in its full extent; we are under no neceſſity, however, of adopting their opinion, in order to ſhew the weakneſs of the Canon's reaſoning. For, in the firſt place, the Canon has not ſatisfactorily eſtabliſhed his main fact, that the lava in queſtion is the identical

tical lava, which Diodorus Siculus mentions to have flowed from Etna, in the ſecond Carthaginian war; and in the ſecond place, it may be obſerved, that the time neceſſary for converting lavas into fertile fields, muſt be very different, according to the different conſiſtencies of the lavas, and their different ſituations, with reſpect to elevation or depreſſion; to their being expoſed to winds, rains, and to other circumſtances; juſt as the time in which the heaps of iron ſlag (which reſembles lava) are covered with verdure, is different at different furnaces, according to the nature of the ſlag, and ſituation of the furnace; and ſomething of this kind is deducible from the account of the Canon himſelf; ſince the crevices of this famous ſtratum are really full of rich good ſoil, and have pretty large trees growing in them.

But if all this ſhould be thought not ſufficient to remove the objection, I will produce the Canon an analogy in oppoſition to his analogy, and which is grounded on more certain facts. Etna and Veſuvius reſemble each other, in the cauſes which produce their eruptions, in the nature of their lavas, and in the time neceſſary to mellow them into ſoil fit for vegetation; or if there be any ſlight difference in this reſpect, it is probably

bably not greater than what ſubſiſts between different lavas of the ſame mountain. This being admitted, which no philoſopher will deny, the Canon's analogy will prove juſt nothing at all, if we can produce an inſtance of ſeven different lavas (with interjacent ſtrata of vegetable earth) which have flowed from Mount Veſuvius, within the ſpace, not of fourteen thouſand, but of ſomewhat leſs than ſeventeen hundred years; for then, according to our analogy, a ſtratum of lava may be covered with vegetable ſoil in about two hundred and fifty years, inſtead of requiring two thouſand for the purpoſe. The eruption of Veſuvius, which deſtroyed Herculaneum and Pompeii, is rendered ſtill more famous by the death or Pliny, recorded by his nephew, in his letter to Tacitus; this event happened in the year 79; it is not yet then quite ſeventeen hundred years, ſince Herculaneum was ſwallowed up: But we are informed by unqueſtionable authority, that "the matter which covers the ancient town of Herculaneum, is not the produce of one eruption only; for there are evident marks, that the matter of ſix eruptions has taken its courſe over that which lies immediately above the town, and was the cauſe of its deſtruction.

deſtruction. Theſe ſtrata are either of lava or burnt matter, *with veins of good ſoil betwixt them.*"* —I will not add another word upon this ſubject; except that the biſhop of the dioceſe was not much out in his advice to Canonico Recupero—to take care not to make his mountain older than Moſes; though it would have been full as well to have ſhut his mouth with a reaſon, as to have ſtopped it with the dread of an eccleſiaſtical cenſure.

You perceive, with what eaſe a little attention will remove a great difficulty; but had we been able to ſay nothing in explanation of this phænomenon, we ſhould not have acted a very rational part, in making our ignorance the foundation of our infidelity, or ſuffering a minute philoſopher to rob us of our religion.

Your objections to revelation may be numerous; you may find fault with the account which Moſes has given of the creation, and the fall; you may not be able to get water enough for an univerſal deluge; nor room enough in the ark of Noah, for all the different kinds of aërial

* See Sir William Hamilton's Remarks upon the Nature of the Soil of Naples and its Neighbourhood, in the Philoſ. Tranſ. Vol. lxi. p. 7.

aërial and terreſtrial animals; you may be diſſatisfied with the command for ſacrificing of Iſaac, for plundering the Egyptians, and for extirpating the Canaanites; you may find fault with the Jewiſh œconomy, for its ceremonies, its ſacrifices, and its multiplicity of prieſts; you may object to the imprecations in the pſalms, and think the immoralities of David a fit ſubject for dramatic ridicule; * you may look upon the partial promulgation of Chriſtianity, as an inſuperable objection to its truth; and waywardly reject the goodneſs of God toward yourſelves, becauſe you do not comprehend, how you have deſerved it more than others; you may know nothing of the entrance of ſin and death into the world, by one man's tranſgreſſion; nor be able to comprehend the doctrine of the croſs, and of redemption by Jeſus Chriſt; in ſhort, if your minds are ſo diſpoſed, you may find food for your ſcepticiſm in every page of the Bible, as well as in every appearance of nature; and it is not in the power of any perſon, but yourſelves, to clear up your doubts; you muſt read and you

* See Saül et David Hyperdrame.

Whatever cenſure the author of this compoſition may deſerve for his intention, the work itſelf deſerves none; its ridicule is too groſs to miſlead even the ignorant.

muſt think for yourſelves; and you muſt do both with temper, with candour, and with care. Infidelity is a rank weed; it is nurtured by our vices, and cannot be plucked up as eaſily as it may be planted: Your difficulties with reſpect to revelation, may have firſt ariſen, from your own reflexion on the religious indifference of thoſe, whom from your earlieſt infancy you have been accuſtomed to revere, and imitate; domeſtic irreligion may have made you willing hearers of libertine converſation; and the uniform prejudices of the world may have finiſhed the buſineſs, at a very early age; and left you to wander through life, without a principle to direct your conduct, and to die without hope. We are far from wiſhing you to truſt the word of the Clergy for the truth of your religion; we beg of you to examine it to the bottom, to try it, to prove it, and not to hold it faſt unleſs you find it good. Till you are diſpoſed to undertake this taſk, it becomes you to conſider with great ſerioufneſs and attention, whether it can be for your intereſt to eſteem a few witty ſarcaſms, or metaphyſical ſubtleties, or ignorant miſrepreſentations, or unwarranted aſſertions, as unanſwerable arguments againſt revelation;

lation; and a very slight reflexion will convince you, that it will certainly be for your reputation, to employ the slippancy of your rhetoric, and the poignancy of your ridicule, upon any subject, rather than upon the subject of Religion.

I TAKE my leave with recommending to your notice, the advice which Mr. Locke gave to a young man, who was desirous of becoming acquainted with the doctrines of the Christian religion. "Study the holy scripture, especially the New Testament: Therein are contained the words of eternal life. It has God for its author; Salvation for its end; and Truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter."*

I am, &c.

* Locke's Posth. Works.

FINIS.